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**HLEDÁNÍ IDENTITY V PRACÍCH LEILY
ABOULELA A BERNARDINE EVARISTO**

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Undergraduate Thesis

**SEEKING IDENTITY IN THE WRITINGS OF LEILA
ABOULELA AND BERNARDINE EVARISTO**

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Plzeň 2012

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Jméno Příjmení

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ABSTRACT

Jindrová, Soňa. University of West Bohemia. July, 2012. Seeking identity in the writings of Leila Aboulela and Bernardine Evaristo. Supervisor: PhDr. Magdaléna Potočňáková, Ph.D.

My undergraduate thesis is called Seeking Identity in the Writings of Leila Aboulela and Bernardine Evaristo. The key issue of this undergraduate thesis is to compare a different view of two contemporary women writers on the lives of immigrants who came to Britain from its former colonies in the period of mass migration and to discover the problems they had to face.

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1. Introduction

Leila Aboulela and Bernardine Evaristo are two contemporary black British women writers describing the difficult situation of people from British colonies and other countries who immigrated to Britain in their books. The main purpose of their journey is seeking new opportunities in the new country. In this undergraduate thesis I am focusing on the difficulties to which the main protagonists are exposed. They come in the hope that the new country will accept them and help them to identify with its culture but the reality is often different.

What do these books have in common? There is one fact which is shared by both of the authors. They both have African roots or African ancestors. The protagonists of their books, who also have a similar family background, are confronted with the tough reality of life, prejudice that rise from ignorance and lack of interest of the majority society, they are subject to racial discrimination and xenophobia, loneliness, alienation, separation and homesickness. They must break barriers of cultural and physical otherness. The reasons for their immigration are similar. As they come from Africa, they want to find a better life in Britain, earn money, get a good education, escape from poverty. In the new country, they look not only for the material things but they also try to assimilate into the new society and to find their new identity. They decide to separate from their homeland, neither they nor their children visit or return home. On the other hand, many of them do not want to change their life absolutely. They partially maintain their cultural identity and they join the same community in the host country.

The books are similar in their themes but they are different in the form and language used. Aboulela's *Coloured Lights* is a book of short stories, which are very poetic and full of emotions. They are stories of love, homesickness, doubts, faith and hope. Evaristo's *Lara* is a novel in verse, a story that guides the reader to the very beginning of the lives of Lara and other members of her family, to their roots through the individual voices of theirs.

Leila Aboulela was born in Cairo in 1964, her mother was Egyptian and her father Sudanese. She moved to Sudan where she lived until 1987. She studied English at the Khartoum American School and at the private Catholic High School. After her studies when she was twenty she moved to Britain. She studied economics in London, then in 1990 she moved to Aberdeen with her husband and children and most of her stories are set there. She started writing when she worked as a teacher at Aberdeen College. Since 2000 she has lived with her family in Jakarta, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Doha. Leila Aboulela has

won many literary prizes. Characters in Aboulela's *Coloured Lights* are people from the Muslim world for whom Islam is a part of their lives. Life brings them face to face with the new reality in the new country. Life situations are sometimes painful, sometimes comical for them (Leila-aboulela). The title of the book symbolizes a colorful diversity typical for multicultural Britain. (Contemporary writers)

Bernardine Evaristo was born in London, the fourth of eight children. Her mother was English and her father Nigerian. Her books are written in various genres: poetry, a verse-novel, a novel-with-verse, a novella and a fully prose novel. She is very talented and successful. Except for writing she also works as a reviewer, a university teacher of creative writing, a judge of literary awards, she gives readings and workshops or courses, she has written drama and fiction for BBC Radio 4, she supports young writers as a mentor (bevaristo). She is compared with the new generation of authors who are black and were born in Britain such as Andrea Levy, Jackie Kay and Hanif Kureishi. Her background has an important impact on her writing. "Evaristo's writing is clearly energized by her own plural, diasporic heritage, which marks her as both a British and a post-colonial writer. For Evaristo to be 'Black' and 'British' is not a contradiction" (Contemporary writers). Her novel *Lara* won the EMMA Best Novel Award in 1999 and it is partly autobiographical, it is based on her own childhood and the history of her family. Lara is a mixed-race girl brought up in Woolwich, a white suburb of London, in the 60s and 70s. Her father Taiwo came to Britain from Nigeria, her mother Ellen is white British. They marry despite the strong disapproval from Ellen's family. Lara's life is described from her childhood to adulthood and then when she seeks her ancestors we travel with her to Nigeria and Brazil. It is a story of immigrants who came to Britain in the post-war period to escape poverty and seek a new life in London. It is also a story of self-discovery, when Lara realizes her personal identity and racial otherness (Contemporary writers).

2. What is identity?

“Identity theory is a microsociological theory, which links self attitudes, or identities to the role relationships and role-related behavior of individuals. The self consists of a collection of identities each of which is based on occupying a particular role” (Desrochers). According to Desrochers, it is possible to define identity as “the answer to the question Who am I?” The relationship between people who belong to the same group and who identify themselves with its ideas is called social identity (ibid). Cultural identity is a dynamic and variable process in which people are joined together to various institutions or communities and other people and its development is continual (Thomas 5). When we think about cultural identity we must consider some aspects for example history, place, nationality, gender, language, religion beliefs, sexual orientation and others. Everybody has their own history and background, it differentiates us from others. Culture definitely shapes our identity. Culture means the everyday habits typical for an individual, language, which is used in everyday communication, values which one appreciates, the usual way of doing something in particular situations, attitudes and ideas. Belonging to a group gives people a feeling of safety, one is a part of a social network whose members give him support and are trustworthy for him (Identity). All these certainties and especially the feeling of belonging somewhere are partially lost for people who decide to live in another country and what makes their situation even more difficult is the color of their skin. The protagonists of the books search for both – the answer to the question “Who am I?” and they also want to find a good place in the new social and cultural structures of the host country.

3. Multicultural Britain

As it was said in the Introduction the protagonists of both books come to Britain from various countries. From the historical point of view “the population of Britain has always been composed of different peoples. The Celts, Saxons and Vikings all came to Britain as the result of various invasions, making the British the most ethnically composite of all European peoples” (Brown). The first black faces appeared in Britain during the Middle Ages. The discovery of the New World changed it. The Europeans needed cheap labour for their plantations in America which they found by buying slaves in Africa. Later, black slaves appeared in wealthy families in England. In the early eighteenth century the number of African men and women living in Britain increased. About 14,000 black people lived there.

In 1833, the Parliament abolished slavery, which stopped arrival of black people to Britain, on the other hand, there were more immigrants coming to Britain from Europe. During the two world wars lots of men from the Empire joined the British Army. Some of them stayed in Britain between the wars and established little communities. At the end of the Second World War there was lack of labor force in Britain and the government started to look for immigrants. Many Poles, Italians or Irish came to Britain but it was not sufficient so the government tried to attract people from the West Indies. This period can be considered as a “massive change” in British society, “the start of mass migration to the UK and the arrival of different cultures” (Short History of Immigration). “The years since 1945 have seen numerous immigration and citizenship and race relations Acts, ... Immigration has become an issue of increasing public and political concern in Britain” (Cusick 259). In the 1950s, the mass migration continued and it was accompanied by increasing racial violence and prejudice because white people feared the black community arriving to Britain. Due to political pressure the government made the immigration for non-white people harder. Nevertheless, it was not stopped. By 1972, people who held a British passport and were born overseas could only settle in Britain if they had a work permit and their parents or grandparents were born in Britain. Between 1968 and 1975, about 83,000 immigrants from the Commonwealth came to the UK. By the 1980’s, the government strictly controlled the entry to the country so it was very hard to get there. In 1981, there were riots in Brixton based on racial intolerance. Similar riots sparked in Liverpool and the Midlands. The British politics started to change when in 1987 four non-white politicians were elected. In the following years new people began to move to the UK, for example

45,000 arrived from Africa, 25,000 from Asia, 22,700 from the Indian sub-continent. After the fall of the Iron Curtain some 125,000 people were allowed to settle in the UK in 2000. However, the growing number of immigrants was accompanied by racial tensions. Sixty years after the start of mass migration to the UK we cannot say whether or not the UK became a tolerant multi-cultural society or whether there is still much to do (Short History of Immigration). Nevertheless, since 2001, when the Race Relation Act came into force, a new attitude has been evident. While in 1978 Margaret Thatcher - before she became the Prime Minister - declared in her interview that some “white people felt swamped by people with a different culture” and spoke about their fears of them (Pilkington 219), in 2008 the Prime Minister Gordon Brown, at the occasion of opening the Black Britannia photographic exhibition, proclaimed that the exhibition “is not just a celebration of the achievements of fifty remarkable people, it is a celebration of the whole contribution of black people to British culture and to British public life” (Black Britannia Exhibition).

For this undergraduate thesis it is also necessary to mention Muslim immigrants. “The first relatively permanent Muslim population was established in Cardiff, Liverpool, Manchester, South Shields and London’s East Ends in the mid-nineteenth century. Since the Second World War, Muslims have migrated to Britain in relatively much larger numbers, with the majority coming from South Asia (primarily Pakistan and Bangladesh). In addition, smaller Muslim communities from a variety of regions, including parts of Africa, Cyprus, Malaysia, the Middle East and more recently Eastern Europe (primarily Bosnia), have also settled in Britain” (Ansari). Their larger communities are settled in industrial cities for example in London or Bradford or in textile towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire. In the 1950s and 1960s they concentrated in particular areas – especially in London, Birmingham, Glasgow, which resulted in setting of large communities of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in these areas (Cusick 291).

Through the 1950s the immigration from Muslim countries was quite low, because the demand for labor force decreased at that time. It grew sharply in 1961 because of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which restricted automatic entry to the UK for Commonwealth citizens. The growth continued until 1970 when the number of Muslim immigrants started to fall down (Ansari).

As it is stated at the beginning of this chapter the population of Britain has always been composed of ‘different peoples’, which is the natural result of the process of migration. Society that consists of two or more different cultures and their subgroups is called multicultural. Members of these groups have often become a “subject to racial

discrimination as a result of being defined as racially different” (Pilkington 50). They are different in language, religion, cultural traditions and their value system and lifestyle. Living together in peace without discrimination or favouring one group is sometimes difficult to achieve. Lack of understanding and tolerance can also lead to forced assimilation. All these phenomena appear in both books and will be discussed in this undergraduate thesis.

4. **Women's Identity**

Coloured Lights

Most of the characters in Aboulela's *Coloured Lights* are mainly Muslim women who arrived in Britain in order to find a better life, get a higher education or follow their husbands. How does the Western society look at Muslim women? Humayun Ansari in his report "Muslims in Britain," declares that:

The dominant western picture of Muslim women depicts them as compliant and unreflective, subject to patriarchal traditions and lacking any active agency to change their condition. ... The absence of parents and in-laws in Britain enabled many immigrant women to escape some traditional restrictions. In public they may suffer from their limited communication skills in English and depend on their husbands and other male family members but inside the families and communities they strongly maintain and transmit cultural and religious values. Although the position of Muslim women has changed, the majority of them remain restricted in their public and private life and they still largely depend on their husbands and male relatives. (Ansari)

The remarkable feature of the women characters in *Coloured Lights* is that they are not only women but also Muslim women and African women, which makes their situation more difficult. (Steiner) Women's inferiority to a husband and absolute dependence on him in the new country is obvious in the story "Ostrich". The main protagonist Sumra came back to Britain, where she lived with her husband Majdy, after two months in Sudan. In her mind there was still a strong feeling of belonging to their homeland. She hesitated to leave the other passengers, she felt strong between her compatriots on board of the plane; they all were proud that they had left Sudan and suddenly in the airport they were separated and their pride had gone. "You look like something from the third world" (39), were the first words from her husband instead of the warm welcome that she had expected. She felt ashamed of her shabby luggage and clothes which were natural a short time before but now she felt that everybody at the airport was looking only at her all the time. She realized that her husband was alienated from her as if he felt ashamed of her, her origin, her bad English and crinkly clothes.

To express her disappointment she says, “He dislikes it if I walk a few steps behind him what would people think, he says, that we are backward, barbaric. He sneers at the Arab women in black *abayas* walking behind their men. Oppressed, that’s what people would think of them. Here they respect women, treat them as equal, we must be the same” (40).

She was forced to live in a foreign country among unknown people with a man who rejected her nature. She had to bear his comments about her, how she looked and he even slapped her when she mentioned polygamy of his father in the presence of his white friends (46). She felt lost in their small flat with thin walls. All people seemed to be the same. It was unable for her to tell who was rich who was poor even who was a man and who was a woman. “Strangers I must respect, strangers who were better than me. This is what Majdy says. Every one of them is better than us” (45). She was not sure about her decision to follow him. She felt threatened but she had no choice. Her husband became another man and he demanded the same from her. Her forced assimilation lead to alienation and loss of her own original identity.

The hierarchy in the Muslim family and the man’s superior position in it is well depicted in the story “Museum”. Shadia, a university student from Khartoum, is going to marry a rich man after her studies and live together with his mother and sister in her homeland. For her future husband it is not important whether Shadia has a university degree. He was not interested in it. A Muslim woman should serve her husband, not work, that is his duty to look after her. He says, “I am very broad-minded to allow you to study abroad. Other men would not have put up with this...” (104). Her mother encouraged Shadia in her studies, she advised her to get a post-graduate degree from Britain and then to build her own career after she gets married. “‘This way,’ her mother said, ‘you will have your in-laws’ respect. They have money but you will have a degree. Don’t end up like me...’” (105). Post-graduate degree enables Shadia to become independent of her husband and to build up her own identity of an educated woman within the bounds of the family, which makes her more valuable and respectable. Nevertheless, Shadia realized that her life would not be easy. Her future husband was a rich man and he did not expect that she would work and had own career. She was expected to be a submissive woman and wife.

In the story “Make Your Own Way Home” Aboulela brings a different view at a white and Muslim woman in a difficult life situation and shows strong and restrictive ties inside a Muslim family. Nadia, a young Muslim woman, visited her white friend Tracy in a nursing home where she had had an abortion. She felt pity for her friend and was shocked

to find that Tracy's parents paid for her abortion, went on holiday and left her alone without any help. For a Muslim woman unwanted pregnancy without marriage is tragedy and has fatal impact on the whole family. "Mothers get divorced for this kind of thing. Sisters remain unwed. Grandmothers go to their graves before their time, crushed by sorrow. A girl's honour is like a matchstick, break it and it can never be fixed" (85). Nadia's family and faith gives her certainty and protection, she seems to be childish and funny but she is not alone, which is the positive aspect of her faith. On the other hand, if she made the same mistake as Tracy it would have fatal consequences for her. In contrast, there is Tracy from a secular family. In her life there are no restrictions, mistakes are forgiven but she is left alone and she has to "make her own way home". Nobody is waiting for her, neither her parents nor her boyfriend. There are pros and cons in both situations. Nadia can rely on her family but has to follow the rules and traditions, while Tracy has to bear consequences of her unrestricted acts herself.

Lara

In Lara we meet several generations of women. It is Lara's very old ancestor who appears first in the prologue of the book. It is a very emotional description of a rape of a black woman, who was then taken as a slave over the ocean, who had no right and no chance to get freedom. "There he pierced me with a bayonet / as I lay on a marble slab, bound. My screams / ricocheted the walls, he ejaculated on my ruptured body..." (Prologue). She is a part of Lara's journey to the history of her family, her great-grandmother. Her grandmother Edith and her mother Ellen play the most important role in Lara's life. And there is finally Lara herself who seeks her own identity and a place in life.

Lara's grandmother Edith was white Irish. Her parents came to London at the end of the nineteenth century from southern Ireland. Their living conditions were very poor. "Her Ma, Marry Jane, a dressmaker, taking in, / stitching food into mouths, clothes onto their bodies. / Her glassblower pa, struggling to be The Provider / on his paltry pay, returning at midnight from the factory" (13). So Edith made a distinct decision not to "end up in the pokey room facing the neighbour's washing line and sharing a toilet" (14). She married Leslie, who was half German and always emphasized origin and good education. She never reconciled with the fact that her daughter Ellen was going to marry a black man. "Baby Ellen was the cherished, cuddled, coddled, / much loved child ..." (11) and her mum loved her so much. When she soothed her, she felt that they are inseparable. "She knew their path would be over locked forever" (11). She did everything in order that her Ellen would be happy and she pinned her hopes on her. She dreamed about her perfect

future when she “pour dreams onto Ellen like syrup on treacle tart”, her manners would be perfect, she would grow up a real lady, “she minds her Ps and Qs”, there were childish “tantrums” and “no playing in the street” because she was not a common child (16). She planned her studies at private grammar school then at university and a successful career.

However, Ellen had her own plans. She decided to devote her life to service to God. “I told my Mummy and she was livid” (24)! Edith’s dream about Ellen’s career dissolved. Ellen wanted to live “a life of love, duty, self-sacrifice to God and souls / would be embodied her role as a White sister”. She intended to teach “missionary enlightening in the dark continent” (8). Moreover, she met Taiwo and tied all her emotions to him. She revealed to him “the goodies” of the country that he had only known as someone who had peered through a window. Her love for Taiwo grew daily. She loved him more than her life and decided to realize her dream through him. “I wanted to help Africa but Africa was brought to me” (10). Unfortunately, she was not aware of the fact that life would not be only a joyride. “Despite the fact that she belongs to the dominant British culture, Ellen carries the burden of ostracizing...” (Toplu). All her life she had to face a strong disapproval from her family and neighbors and live a hard life of a white woman who married a black man.

Lara, Ellen and Taiwo’s daughter, who was born in Britain, was neither white nor black; nevertheless, she was confronted with similar problems as her father. Her main problem was to find a place where she would be just herself. Seeking the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where am I from?’ accompanied her from her youth to adulthood. “...what is clear is that self and identity are perpetual processes” (Thomas 6). Her identity as a woman changed with place and people, especially men that she met on her journey. Yet, even at the end of it, in the country of her distant relatives, she did not find anybody who would give her the answer. She understood that her identity was not always the same but it was changeable.

5. Racial and Physical Otherness

One of the crucial points of the lives of the black immigrants is to cope with racial discrimination in the host country. The theories discussing the relations between race, nation and culture that have appeared since the nineteenth century found out that immigration and ethnicity had been seen very negatively. Influenced by these facts, most of the British reactions to immigration had been characterized as xenophobic and racist. Racism appears in two forms. The older form, biological racism, is linked with violence and aggression. However, the new form of racism, cultural racism, is not so apparent. According to its theory it is not fair to ask people coming from a different part of the world to change their lifestyle to become proper British. On the other hand, controversial Lord Norman Tebbit's 'cricket test' claims, that if people of other nationalities living constantly in Britain still support a different national sport team or other cultural events cannot be called British, because they have not completely adapted to life in Britain. The rule for all people coming to live in Britain is to identify with the 'mother country'. Most of them really have become good citizens. However, some of them have experienced racism; their families were torn away from familiar places and life. These people try to maintain or even emphasize their ethnic identity, which leads to their segregation. (Smyth 260,261) "Muslim immigrants, for example, were subject to racial and ethnical discrimination at schools, social services, employment, social life and other areas and they lived in disrepair houses in the areas of multiply deprivation" (Ansari). Salman Rushdie, in his essay *The New Empire within Britain* from 1981, writes about a critical phase, which Britain undergoes. It is not only a political or economic crisis but also a crisis of the whole culture where racism is "the most clearly visible part" (Rushdie 129). Almost all the protagonist of *Coloured Lights* and *Lara* encounter a different form of racism in their lives.

Coloured Lights

An open manifestation of racism became apparent to Sumra in the story "Ostrich". She followed her husband, who decided to live in Britain, but she did not understand why her husband wanted to stay there. He showed her the graffiti 'Black Bastards' on the wall of the mosque and some more on the newsagent's door, which said 'Paki go home'. Sumra felt a new fear of something unknown. She did not know who wrote the graffiti, it was impossible for her to identify her enemies. She was not able to recognize them but they could very easily recognize her. Who of the people she had met agreed with the notice on the wall? The strong feeling of being a stranger appeared to her, and she bitterly realized

that her enemies could be everywhere (45). Her husband's white friends, good people as her husband claimed, like what she cooked but did they really like her? Samra did not feel free with them. She could not be sincere, could not say what she wanted, her husband forced her to pretend, not to be herself, not to speak openly about Sudan with all its peculiarities that were typical for local life and her nature. He explained to her that they could forgive her for her ugly colour, thick lips and rough hair, but she had to think modern thoughts. He said, "...be like them in the inside if you can't be from the outside" (46).

Shadia and other foreign students in the story "Museum" were exposed to racist behaviour of local people. They then shared their experience. "In the cafeteria, drinking coffee with Asafa and the others, the picture of 'hospitable Scotland' was something different. Badr, the Malaysian student, quietly explained that their windows were smashed yesterday and his wife was afraid to go out. Shadia was frightened. She widely opened her eye and asked who did it. 'Racists,' said the Turkish girl..." (101)

Majed from the story of the same name had to face discrimination at work. He was forced to get a humiliating job as an unskilled worker "spent hours mopping up ASDA'S floor" (125) and because he could not to cope with the situation, he started to drink alcohol. However, he drank in private, at nights, thought that his wife did not know it. He did not want to hurt her. He hoped that after finishing his Ph.D. he would get a better job and he would not have to do menial jobs. (123) "Minority ethnic groups face racial discrimination in the employment and housing markets, and within the education system. Within the labour market they face higher risk of long-term unemployment and a glass ceiling in relation to elite positions... they are more likely to experience poverty..."(Pilkington 6).

Nevertheless, the negative attitude towards another race appears not only in Britain but also in the immigrants' families, which makes their situation even more difficult. Yassir from the story *Souvenirs* felt guilty because his mother had never reconciled with his marriage. She always wanted him to marry an African girl and Emma, his Scottish wife, had never become her daughter-in-law. She did not exist for her she had never voiced her name. "But 'Your wife – what's her name?'" was how his mother referred to Emma. She would not say Emma's name. She would not 'remember' it. It would have been the same if Emma had been Jane, Alison or Susan, any woman from the 'outside'" (12). Yassir perceived his mother's behaviour as "his punishment" because of his departure and breach of family traditions.

Lara

“Race and ethnicity are both categories which involve drawing boundaries between people” (Pilkington 27). Racial boundaries are based on physical features, such as a skin colour, a quality of hair, or expression of a face while ethnic boundaries are based on differences in language, religion and individual customs. Sociologists claim, that they are both socially constructed and can “empirically” overlap. Different physical appearance, as the most distinctive feature visible at first sight, gives rise to racial prejudice and makes the process of assimilation to a new social group difficult or impossible (ibid).

Focusing on racism, Lara’s father Taiwo has experienced racial discrimination very soon after his arrival to Britain. “Many people are respectful but some idiots shout, / ‘Oi! Johnny! Sambo! Darkie! Nigger!’ at us” (4). Even some people from the West Indies mocked him and asked if people in his country still lived on trees. “Mama, in this country I am coloured. Back home I was just me” (4)! These circumstances made him change his name. He found out that to have an African name brought problems with hiring a house or getting a job. “My nickname is Bill now, after William the Great, / I have found that African name closes the door.../ It is so hard to find a good place to live here because / they do not want us in their houses (5).

Taiwo depicted negative perception of the blacks by white people and was strongly hurt. He says that white people still think that the blacks are savages and the British are “superior” to them (39). They believed the stupid American films about Tarzan are truthful. Taiwo felt that people “sneered” at him in the street and looked at him as if he was of “the gutter” (39). The very first Taiwo’s need was to earn money for a living. At that moment came big disillusionment. Getting a job was not easy for a black man. Taiwo complained that he had fought for the Commonwealth in the war and it did not help him when he came to seek a better life and felt unwanted there. “Now the emperor’s disowned sons congregate in Commonwealth dance halls” (6).

Another situation when Taiwo was exposed to open and strong racial discrimination was his first meeting with Ellen’s mother Edith. She did not approve of the fact that her daughter’s boyfriend is a “darkie”. She mocked his name and his origin. Edith openly revealed her strong disagreement and disillusionment when she talked about Taiwo with her daughter. “‘Oh! He’s not too dark, is he?’ Edith grimaced” (29). It was an unacceptable situation for her. “Where did this Tiyowoyo spring from then? / ...So where

does Tooyamiya hail from? Alright! Tie!-Wo! Bill! Well / that's better. A native from a colony! Good Lord! / So he is dark! Have you no sense of morals" (29)!

In order to emphasize the aversion of the white majority towards the blacks and their racist thinking Evaristo writes about the attitudes of Edith's neighbours who gave her their support. Gossips were spread. People called Taiwo a nigger, a darkie, an African cannibal, savage, monkey, heathen, a thing from the outer space. "His colour will come off on the sheets, p'raps she can / scrub him white, they have tails, you know, live in mud huts, swing from trees , were idol-worshippers / till we civilised them... A dark one, they mutter. Dark! Dark! Dark" (33)! They sympathized with Edith and thought about Ellen and Taiwo's children as about "half breeds and mongrels" who should not have been brought into this world. Edith was angry about Ellen's decision to marry Taiwo. She demanded that Ellen not ruin her life by marrying a nigger-man (32). She continued being sarcastic and cruel when she met Taiwo for the first time to show him her strong antipathy. She asked him how many wives he had and what he did exactly. When he told her that he was a welder and was saving money for his studies, she looked at him with defiance which emitted from her whole body. Any of his answers were not good enough for Edith. Taiwo felt that she did not see him but "only a colored" (37).

When Taiwo accompanied Ellen home her mother hisses at him to go away so that the neighbors would not see him. Taiwo felt uncomfortable and was frustrated by Edith's attitude. "She judges me but she does not know me. / Oh Mama, these people hate me" (35). Edith's feeling of superiority hurt Taiwo and her attitude humiliated him.

All the pressure and anxiety of the burden of being a black immigrant in Britain is obvious from Taiwo's complaints. "Life is a boxing ring with no referee, judge or prize. / How I tire of defending my right to exist on these / great British islands. How I ache with invisible bruises" (49). Because of all these difficulties, he decided not to say anything to Ellen about his family and severed all ties with them. "Taiwo did not paint his childhood landscape for Ellen, / did not orate the sequence of birth and deaths, her mind / should be kept blank, he decided, she need not know" (28).

"Taiwo and Ellen's marriage had been considered an 'unspeakable union' from its inception in the 1950s and their eight children suffer from taunt in school as well as attacks by the National Front in the 1970s" (Stein 82). They humiliated Ellen in the street, called her a "white whore in the Fifties ...threw insults from cars" (85). The National Front was an extreme right-wing movement formed in 1967. In its ideology were found continuities with two previous fascist movements, Mosley's British Union of Fascist and Leese's

Imperial Fascist League. The central element of their ideology was that White race was dominant and their leaders “could rule the world themselves.” Obvious popularity of the NF and their “openly expressed racist views encouraged the main political parties to maintain a very restrictive immigration policy.” Margaret Thatcher also mentioned the NF in her speech in 1978 when she spoke about the “fears of white of black immigrants” which drove them to the NF (Pilkington 218).

Edith moaned that she would never be able to love her darkie grandchildren. She complained about Ellen. “... she’ll not listen to me or Father Augustus who said / that taking the word of the Lord to the primitives / is one thing, but it’s quite another lying down with them” (38). At the wedding day Edith strongly showed her disapproval to Ellen when she hurt her with “Marry in red! Wish you were dead” (40)! According to the Irish wedding tradition, the colour of the dress can determine how successful the marriage will be. Red symbolizes misfortune. She was concerned about the disadvantaged of racially mixed children, about their ostracization, the weaknesses they would inherit from both parents, who would “bleach their skin like the American negroes” (38).

As in *Colored Lights* in *Lara* racial prejudice appears in Taiwo’s own family. His mother wrote to him that he had better find a Nigerian bride (Stein 83). “So! You choose an England-lady to woo? Eh! Eh! / Son! There are plenty nice Nigerian girls here” (26)!

Lara was growing up in London in the 1960s and 1970s in a mixed-race family. “Born in 1962, the ‘toffee’ coloured child Lara suffers more than her parents for being both a hybrid and a girl in multicultural London” (Toplu)! Living in this period was very complicated for the family because the immigration laws were very strict and the police used “repressive strategies” against the immigrants, especially blacks and Asians. Lara and all her brothers and sisters were a laughing stock at school and had to face racially motivated attacks. (Stein 83).

Lara’s encounters with racism revealed in several situations. She witnessed attacks of skinheads in their street, their windows were smashed which was not new to her. “Late 74 the NF juggernaut braked out in our street, / offloaded two teenage brothers at No49, swastika / tattoos, shaved heads, crombies, Union Jack braces...” She remembered her father chased them down the street her whole childhood. She panicked when “the skinheads’ ebony DMs approached, / cross the road, and when I saw my father in the distance...” (70). She says, “It was bloody embarrassing having a black dad” (70).

Due to the fact that she did not know anything about her father’s origin and was born in Britain she did not perceive her appearance as a problem. At all-white school in

Woolwich, Southeast London, Lara at first did not notice her differences (Stein 83). She wore the school uniform like the others “five hundred blue-beret’d pre and apres pubescent / descended the stern gates to ivy-clad grammar” (61). After a childish quarrel with her schoolmates her personality was hurt for the first time. They compared their lips and legs and found that Lara’s were too fat. Lara was envious of their blond hair because her black hair “couldn’t even fit the school beret on, it just bounced off” (61). Her longing for having “different” hair and being similar to the other girls lead her to seek some solution. She secretly tried to tame her bulky hair with a white swimming cap, which she covered with a yellow, long, soft, lamb wool cardigan and imagined she was blonde. She became aware of her otherness for the first time when her best schoolmates asked her about her origin:

Where are you from La? Susie suddenly asked / One lunch break on the
tennis fields.’ ‘Woolwich.’ / No, silly, where are you from, y’know
originally? / If you really must know I was born in Eltham, actually.
My dad says you must be from Jamaica, Susie insisted. / I’m not Jamaican!
I’m English. Then why are you coloured? / Lara’s heart shuddered,
she felt so humiliated, so angry. / ‘Look, my father’s Nigerian, my
mother’s English, alright?’ / So you’re half-caste! Lara tore at the grass
on silence. / ‘Where is Nigeria then, is it near Jamaica?’ It’s in Africa.’
‘Where’s Africa exactly?’ How should I know, I don’t / Bloody well live
there, do I! Is your dad from the jungle? (65)

In this moment it is necessary to mention the fact that forty per cent of black Britons are not immigrants but people who were born and grew up in Britain and their homeland is just Britain but they are still considered to be those whose real home is in some other place (Rushdie 132).

Later on Lara was confronted with the cruel reality again. This time her friend Susie’s boyfriend behaved contemptuously when they were at the disco. “You never said she was a nig nog....Don’t bring her again. / What’re you doing fraternising with them? / I’ll go to the disco alone. / I’m not walking in with that. / It’s bloody embarrassing” (67)! He spoke about Lara and used ‘it’ for her and then she saw him “ape a monkey at her, go ‘hooh! hooh! hooh!’” and laughing at her with his friends (68). The fact that racism appeared in every aspect of everyday life is also obvious in the language. Lara and her

father are called many offensive terms for example a sambo, darkie, African cannibal, nig nog or nigger.

Later Lara realized her otherness more intensively because it became more visible. “In the showers at school I began to notice my difference. / My skin was drier, pubies curly, titties pointy, bum perched. / I wanted to be invisible” (70). Lara’s appearance was the most important thing for her and she felt “repulsive” because of her dark skin and wiry hair. She started to hate herself. Her mother’s arguments about her heart and personality were worthless for her. Only her look was important. Nothing else mattered (70).

After all that bad experience Lara still reckoned Britain as her homeland because she was born there and she identified herself as “half-caste”. A visit of her cousin Beatrice was a breaking point in her thinking. Beatrice’s experience with life in Britain openly revealed to Lara what the whites think about the blacks. “They don’t care whether / your mother’s white, green or orange with purple spots, / you’re a nigger to them, lovey, or a nigra as you like to say” (74). She spoke about the riots of the twentieth century when the “marauding whites” beat the blacks and explained to Lara that they did not stop to ask them if they were half-caste. “Oh excuse me sir, just before I kick your / head in, is your mother white?” She revealed to Lara that in Liverpool, where she lived, young black people could not get a good job, no matter they were “plain, milk or even white chocolate” so they became “riff-raff”. She described Liverpool as the “apartheid state of Great Britain and the biggest slave port” (75). Beatrice tried to force Lara to reconcile with the fact that she was black (Toplu) and always would be because of “the P word, prejudice” (76). She witnessed racial prejudice, which was deeply rooted in white society, all her life.

6. Religious Identity

Coloured Lights

Religious identity and practice of an African Muslim who immigrated to Britain is an important topic in Aboulela's *Coloured Lights*. Aboulela wants to show a state of mind of ordinary Muslims who try to practise their faith in a difficult situation and in a society which does not sympathize with their religion (Steiner). "In the early 1960s, Islam played a cohesive role among many Muslim workers ..., and stimulated a sense of identity that ignored doctrinal and other differences." (Ansari) Approximately 1,200,000 Muslims who live in Britain were born there. Others arrived in Britain from the Indian subcontinent or African countries. Their children, who have grown up in Britain, consider themselves to be British Muslims rather than black Britons. The main goal for this new generation is to integrate Islamic religious traditions into everyday life in British society. While in the 1960s only one fifth of them actively practised their religion, in the 1980s their number increased to one half (Cusick 291). Therefore, the fact is that for many immigrants their religion is an integral part of their lives and for young people whose parents were not born in Britain "religion – such as Hinduism or Islam – is one important strand of their identity" (Cusick 311). "Muslim religious identity in Britain ranges from devout adherence to orthodox Islamic practice to nominal affiliation, and is negotiated in complex, shifting and multi – faceted ways" (Ansari). It is obvious that there are different approaches to Muslim identity but they are all related to living in a state where Muslims are a minority. Most Muslims who came to Britain from the outside are considered to be 'outsiders' by the white majority and their religion is reckoned as 'inferior' (Ansari).

When Anita Sethi interviewed Leila Aboulela she asked her what religion meant to her. Aboulela answered, "My faith was started off by my grandmother and mother, and so I always saw it as a very private, personal thing". On the other hand, they had never been victims of their faith and were very modern. Her grandmother studied medicine in the forties, which was very unusual at that time, and her mother was a professor at university, so Aboulela herself had never imagined a faithful woman as somebody who behaves or gets dressed in a certain way. She said she had grown up in a westernised environment but was very shy and quiet and she had always wanted to wear *hijab* but had not been brave enough to do so. During her studies in London, where she was only one of many, she put it on and "felt very free". She said that her personal and religious identity was more important to her than her national identity, because she could carry her religion everywhere

she moved (Sethi). She demonstrates this claim in her short stories and novels. Her characters practice prayer, faith rituals, are in connection with the community of believers and study Qur'an everywhere it is possible without regard to geographical location. Feeling of grief and loss is moderate when they are in a spiritual connection with Allah. Aboulela emphasizes positive function of religion in everyday life rather than its repressive form (Steiner).

It is obvious that there is a variety of ways how British Muslims respond to the challenges of living in Britain. Some of them tend to become more secular and their faith loses significance for their identity but, on the other hand, some of them become "firmer in their religious convictions ...and some younger Muslim in particular 'seek' true Islam through their own interpretation of religious sources" (Ansari).

All of these approaches are apparent in the story "The Boy from the Kebab Shop". Two young people, Dina and Kassim, have a similar family background. Dina lived with her mother, an Egyptian woman, who married a Scottish husband many years ago and followed him to Scotland. Her family disinherited her so Dina had never been to Egypt. Her father died and her mother was still mourning him. After so many years in Scotland Dina's mother assimilated into the majority society and became an ordinary woman, she lost her faith and succumbed to all the benefits of the western world. She lost the link with her religion. She spent a lot of time drinking alcohol, eating, dieting, and watching Egyptian films on TV. Sometimes she gave Dina information about Egyptian culture, which she always treasured. However, her ties to Islam were fragile and distant and she felt that she belonged nowhere and to nobody (61).

Kassim's job was to serve customers in a kebab shop. His mother was Scottish and his father Moroccan. He recalled that he "had not had a religious upbringing. His Moroccan father had given him a Muslim name, circumcised him at the age of eight months, and took him a total five times to the children's mosque school. After that the secular life had taken over" (64). Kassim's mother was not interested in religion and did not have any Muslim friends. Despite this fact he "is very serious about his faith" (Steiner). What or who pulled him into his faith? It was Besheer, the owner of the kebab shop, his family and all the Muslims around him. It was Besheer, who showed Kassim, how to live in Islam and let him experience the invisible but strong powers that bound him to the others. The same powers attracted Dina. In the kebab shop Dina felt happy. She found herself in a community of people who gave her a feeling of fellowship. "Aboulela carefully constructs opposites in the story, where her dieting, bitterness and loneliness represents

Dina's Western home, and where succulence, intimacy, vulnerability and community are an alternative life represented by Kassim and Islam" (Steiner). Dina's identity was restored when she said 'Salam Alleikum' for the first time and she was given a reply. "And she was not an outsider today, not a customer, but one of 'them', pushing open a private door... as if she was part of the family too" (69). Kassim as well as Dina rediscovered their faith and experienced its power personally. Two lonesome young people became members of a community and identified with its ideas which filled their lives with new certainty.

The story "Tuesday Lunch" offers a picture of a Muslim family who practised their faith and kept all the rules including food. Little Nadia lived in the soothing arms of her family and Islam. They preserved their Muslim identity and faith and brought up their children in the same way. According to Humayun Ansari "there are different ways of being Muslim in Britain and one of the strategies is the transmission of the faith to their children". Nadia wanted to equal her friend Tracy and other children and taste ordinary food that caused her a problem but she found safety in her family and in prayer.

The role of faith and a family is again obvious in the story "Make Your Way Home". Nadia visited Tracy in a nursing home where Tracy had an abortion. Nadia represents a family that is devoted to the Muslim faith and her best friend Tracy a secular British family. The strong ties to Islam give Nadia a feeling of safety, fellowship and identity. The spiritual values of Islam are described as something that surrounds Nadia. "Tracy smiles at the 'we' in Nadia's word. Nadia goes out with her parents more than any girl that Tracy knows. There is something childlike about Nadia, something pampered, though she could not be described as spoiled. Aboulela says that Nadia has "a looked-after air about her" (93) and she compares Islam to one of "different lenses through which you could look at the world" (90).

The author brings an interesting point of view on Islam, from the other side, in the story "Majed". Sudanese student Hamid solved his difficult situation by marriage. He married a Scottish woman who converted to Islam. Aboulela shows the different relation of Hamid and Ruqiyah to Islam. "She was so good, so strong, because she converted. But he, he had been a Muslim all his life and was, it had to be said, relaxed about the whole thing. Wrong, yes, it was wrong" (123). Majed more than in his faith was looking for relief in a bottle of alcohol. Unfinished thesis and humiliating job tortured him. He thought that he would not be able to love the white woman but later he found out that she is different from other European women. Why did she convert? She wanted to change her identity and

become invisible for her former despotic husband. In Islam she found safety and her new self.

The main protagonist in the story “Museum” realized the importance of faith in life. Shadia, a Sudanese university student, really missed things which she had thought she would never miss in a foreign country. She had never got up to pray when she was at home and this was what she missed most in the new country - a prayer. She found a connection with her homeland in the spiritual connection with Allah. It was just the voice of a muezzin from the mosque calling people to pray. She realized it there in Scotland and became even a better Muslim than before. “One day she forgot to pray in the morning. She reached the bus stop and then realized that she hadn’t prayed. That morning folded out like the nightmare she sometime had, of discovering that she had gone out into the street without any clothes” (103).

To sum up, faith has an important place in Aboulela characters’ lives. They live in faith, preserve it in the new country, make it an inseparable part of their identity. Some of them miss it, some of them rediscover their lost religiosity again. Faith is a very personal thing for them and they cope with it on their own. Even for people coming from the outside faith can help to change their lives.

Lara

Religion is not the central motive in *Lara*, nevertheless, it plays an important role in the lives of Lara’s white Anglo-Irish grandmother and mother but not in her life. They were members of the Catholic Church and Ellen, before she met Taiwo, “...wanted to marry Heavenly Bridegroom, / imbued from birth in the sanctity of the Catholic Church, / she worshipped Her Lord in daily prayer...” (8) Her wish was to give her life to God. Her faith helped her to defend her love for Taiwo. She did not understand her mother’s animosity toward him. They both used Catholic teachings in arguing with each other. (Toplu) According to their faith all people are equal. Ellen argued, that we all are God’s children so, “Why such a fuss because of colour? She barely noticed it” (36). Lara herself did not have any evident ties neither to Christianity nor to Islam. What worried her much more was her origin and identity as a girl and later as a woman.

7. Cultural Otherness

Different cultural traditions, manners, ways of expressing, thinking and their different perception can also cause problems and misunderstandings between the newcomers and the people from the host country. The protagonist of both books found themselves in a hopeless situation just because of these phenomena.

Coloured Lights

A Sudanese student Shadia and a young Irish man Brian in the story “Museum” met at Aberdeen University. Although they are both immigrants, they came from different cultural backgrounds “they both are challenged to reassess their stereotypes and cultural clichés” (Steiner). What Aboulela describes as “culture shock” and also something which made Shadia feel afraid was Brian’s unconventional appearance. She had never seen such a man. He had a silver earring in his eyebrow and straight long hair of a “dull colour between yellow and brown” that he tied up with a rubber band. His silver earring was another “strangeness of the West” (99) for her. She was also confused about Brian’s behaviour. He differed so much from her and other foreign students. She was astonished at his attitude to the lectures. “He mumbled and slouched and did not speak with respect to the lecturers. He spoke to them as if they were his equals” (101). Due to the fact that Shadia had problems with understanding the lectures she dared to ask Brian for his perfect notes. After asking him she could see hesitation and surprise in his eyes as if she was “an insect” or could not speak (102).

Although this situation caught them both unawares, it formed a fragile foundation for their relationship. In order to get closer to Shadia Brian spoke about his interest in Islam, which seems to be a way, how to break down the cultural boundaries and make their relationship real. He told her about his imaginary trip to Mecca in a book and invited her to the African Museum with the intention to moderate her homesickness and to get closer to her (Steiner). He did not have an idea that the museum with its distorted picture of her homeland would split them up. Shadia was disappointed with the misinterpretation of her country in the museum. Africa was pictured as a country inhabited only by herds of antelopes. “She should not be here; there was nothing for her. She wanted to see the minarets, boats fragile on the Nile, people” (117). She also expected that the exhibition would reduce her homesickness but there was nothing which could please her. The museum functioned “as a site of imperial power” (Steiner) and did not say anything about real life. The worse about it was the fact that Brian believed it. Shadia thought, “The

imperialists who had humiliated her history were heroes in his eyes” (117). She felt sorry for him. “They are telling you lies in this museum,” she told him. “Don’t believe them. It’s all wrong. It’s not jungles and antelopes, it’s people” (119). Shadia’s pride was hurt. She believed that he was the same as the other Britons and did not allow him to enter her world. She felt weak and ashamed and did not have enough strength to explain him her feelings.

On the other hand, Shadia was depicted as a proud woman who was aware of her class dominance in her homeland (Steiner). She was going to marry a rich man, who was building a new house for her, and she was proud of her father – gynecologist with his own private practice, she spoke proper English and realized Brian’s lower position in society when he talked about his parents. His father was the kind of man who her future husband hired to work on their new house. “In Khartoum she never mixed with people like that” (106). It was Brian who was more open and forthcoming but the museum thwarted his effort. “The power of the empire in the museum space, as well as her personal struggles with the course and the Scottish environment, defeat Shadia’s wish to connect Brian” (Steiner). The sense of superiority and different perception of other culture lead to mutual incomprehension.

Another interesting moment that shows different cultural manners and their perception and could lead to misunderstanding was Shadia’s date with Brian. At first, she hesitated whether to go or not. She was aware that in her country it was impossible to go out with a man without the company of her friends. Later in the museum Brian held her arm. Shadia was shocked because no one had touched her before except for her mother. “She pulled her arm away. She walked away, quickly up the stair” (118). The unexpected close physical contact confused her. She felt frightened and a bit angry.

In the story “Hamid” the man of the same name and his white wife entered into marriage which first looked like a deal because he needed a visa to stay in Britain and she needed to be hidden from her despotic husband who was the reason for her conversion to Islam. They created an extraordinary family with two white and two African children. “Their babies two with European two with African look attracted the attention of people. At school when Ruqiyah and Majed went to pick up Robin, no one believed that they were brothers....The other mothers outside the school looked at her oddly, smiled politely” (125). But the colour of skin and different cultural background were not important for Majed and Ruqiyah. They found that only love and tolerance were really important.

The clash of two different cultures is the central motive in the story “Souvenirs”. The misunderstanding and little effort to get to know one another is apparent on both sides. Sudanese Yassir left his homeland to work on the North-Sea oil rig and got married to a Scottish wife. She symbolized the new life in the new country. “For Yassir, Emma was Aberdeen. Unbroken land after the sea. Real life after the straight lines of the oil-rig. A kind of freedom” (13). He got married to her in Scotland, without asking his mother for permission.

Unfortunately, Yassir’s wife Emma refused to visit his homeland because of cultural prejudice. She did not know much about Sudan but, generally, African countries were considered to be dangerous by the majority of society. She did not want their daughter Samia travelled there. “A few jabs! Typhoid, yellow fever, cholera, TB! And Samia might get bitten by this sandfly ... She is only three. It’s not worth it – maybe when she’s older...” (17). She was not curious to know where her husband had grown up because she had never heard anything good about that place. Although she had never been to Africa, she shared attitudes of other people that originated in ignorance and lack of interest.

In spite of Emma’s aversion, Yassir wanted to give her something to break her bias. Something which would help him to persuade her and to relieve her of her fears. He realized that it was not possible to show the real life in the picture, it is not possible to transfer the atmosphere, music, lights, scent, the things that could not have been delivered but he wished Emma would know them and fall in love with them. “Not the beads not the paintings, but other things.” (30) He knew the best would be to visit Africa because Africa itself “would move her, startle her, touch in her in some irreversible way” (28). In his heart, Africa, it was people, his mother and sister, his house, but he was not able to bring them to Emma. It was her turn now.

Yassir was forced to choose between his mother and his wife. No matter how he chose he would always lose. He was caught in the trap of cultural prejudice deeply rooted in both of his families and was seeking a way how to bring them closer together. Unfortunately, his effort was in vain.

Lara

Different perception of everyday life and habits accompanied Lara’s father immediately after his arrival. He was surprised with the size of London and people’s indifference. They only did their jobs and were not interested in life and other people around them. London was a large city but people there did not know each other they did

not care about what happened next door. He felt alone and isolated. He compared them to people who died every evening and came back to life in the morning:

You would not believe the size of London, Mama, / but people live like mice,
scurry into their houses / at night and draw the curtains, the streets are quiet /
as cemeteries. You think they are dead, but come / morning they unlocked
their doors, charge back down / the pavement as if life is somewhere else. If
I say / hello they are frightened or angry or cross the road. / When we coloured
laugh freely they scowl at us / and on the Underground everyone stares into
space. (5)

As it was mentioned in the previous chapter Taiwo decided not to tell Ellen anything about his homeland, he never took her there because he did not have enough money to do so. He broke all the ties and decided to bring their children up strictly in his “new republic”, they “will not swim in a lake of lost dreams... This is a harsh harsh world, they will be prepared” (50). Evaristo recounts Taiwo’s cruel everyday reality and his effort to survive and feed his family. Anonymity, monotony, getting up very early, hard work and feelings of despair and injustice, bitter destiny, lost dreams accompanied him on his every step.

Lara, “a toffee child”, was a wandering protagonist. “Lara’s travels evoke the history of the European conquest of South America and the colonization of Africa... She travels backward through time, symbolically reversing the history of her ancestors while retelling it” (Stein 80). She traveled back to search for her lost origin. Born as a British subject to a mixed family she always felt to be British. Her encounters with racial prejudice caused by her different physical appearance and her father’s attempt not to reveal anything about his homeland made her take her own journey to the history of her family and to find out who she really was. When she was a child her “diluted colour” (74) allowed her to release herself from being labeled as black. Yet, she started to notice her otherness and looked for her real self. She considered herself “a spicy mix of marinated cultures” (69) but did not know which of them is hers. “I longed for an image, / a story, to speak me, describe me, birth me whole. / Living in my skin, I was, but which one” (69)?

Later when she decided to travel through Europe with her friend Trish, she found that they “become more British” while they were darken “with the Turkish sun, yet less

aware of race..." (97). She did not have to think about her skin or nationality there because there she was 'just Lara'. Having had a short love affair with a Turkish man, she felt safe, like "in a capsule" but she knew that it would not last forever (98). In a relationship with Josh, a Nigerian, she tried to find herself in her skin and tried "to feel at home within her skin" (Stein 84). "I began to dip into my skin like a wet suit, / toes first, warily, wriggled about, then legs all in, / by summer 81 I'd zipped up and dived head first..." (88). But it did not help her "to solve her identity problem" (Toplu) Josh accused her of not being African enough. "...you don't even know what / Jollof rice is, let alone how to cook it. You're strictly / a fish finger and mash girl" (90). She was not white enough to be British and, at the same time, she lost everything that connected her to Africa except for her appearance. Therefore, she started to search for the past of her family.

After forty-five years Lara and her parents finally visited Nigeria. "She inhaled the spied aromatic air of Nigeria, deeply, / drunk with its vitality, / absorbed the prickly dry heat." This is the land of my father, she mused. / I wonder if I could belong" (104). She hoped that she would find herself, her real homeland. "However, while perceived as black in London, in her father's birthplace, Lagos (and in contradiction to it), she became "Oyinbo," that is "Whitey" ...This also reminds us that crossing the borders can entail a change in social status and role and often a change of colour" (Stein 86). In Britain she was black, in Turkey more English and in Lagos white. Lara felt that she could not be 'just her'; she was not the same Lara. Her identity changed depending on the place where she was. "Her identity was relational" (Stein 86). Evaristo guides Lara to Brazil, the birthplaces of some of her ancestors, where, as she hoped, "the past will close in on her" (137). Nevertheless, she left disappointed, she did not find anything and anybody. There was not anything to look for anymore. She returned to London, which, as she resolved, would be her future. Her past was over her.

8. Homesickness, Alienation and Assimilation

Coloured Lights

The feelings of homesickness, separation and alienation accompany all the characters in Leila Aboulela's stories, which are "full of sensual nostalgic moments" (Steiner). Steiner says, "Aboulela's characters negotiate migration on their own terms. Nostalgia in her texts functions strategically in providing the characters with an imaginary, often idealized memory of the past, which becomes the basis of their critique of the present in the West." Her characters long for home they romanticize their homeland and compare it with the alien environment in Britain, they have a feeling of loss and displacement (Steiner).

In the book we can find a couple of situations in which the protagonists of the stories have to face the tough reality of life in Britain that seems to be unbearable. Their memories and imagination of their homeland help them to make their lives easier. Warm sunny weather and the landscape of the Nile often referred to by the author is put in contrast to the everyday reality in Britain.

Sumra in the story "Ostrich" felt abandoned immediately after her arrival to Britain. A couple of hours before in Khartoum she was lucky that she was leaving it. Now she was separate, "dispersed into the cloudy city" (40). Only two months in Khartoum were sufficient for Sumra to forget how cold wet and unfamiliar this country could be. "The green leaves in Khartoum are a different green, sharper, drier, arrogant in the desert." She realized it when she felt her sandals were soaked with water. After two months in Khartoum she felt like she was at the beginning again. "Two months wiped out two years, and I am a stranger once again," thought Sumra (42). She felt like a stranger who appeared in an unknown place, stranger who did not know what to do and how to live (45).

A Sudanese woman from the story of the same name, "Coloured Lights", who works in London is, exposed to new culture and a different lifestyle. She is separated from her husband and children. She cannot accustom herself to reality and she remembers her homeland during a journey on a bus. The impulse that starts a stream of thoughts in her mind is the West Indian conductor and the Christmas atmosphere all around her. Hurrying people, nobody can see her, nobody knows her. Coloured lights everywhere. For Londoners a symbol of happiness and joy for her a symbol of death because her brother was killed by electric lights on his wedding day. She is upset by the new situation and all

the new things surrounding her. This country will never be her home. Cold and wet London weather is there as a contrast to her warm homeland:

I was crying for Taha or maybe because I was homesick, not only for my daughters or my family but sick with longing for the heat, the sweat and the water of Nile. The English word homesick is a good one: we did not have exactly the same in Arabic. In Arabic my state would have been described as 'yearning for the homeland' or the 'sorrow of alienation' and there is also truth in this. I was alienated from this place where darkness descended unnaturally at 4 pm and people went about their business as if nothing had happened (1).

On the other hand, there are also bitter memories of her homeland in which she is aware of problems such as poverty, unemployment, lack of food and a low level of educational system ejecting people from African developing countries to work and study abroad. They are forced to earn money to help their families and appear in isolation in another country among people who are not able to understand their problems. "We are ready to go anywhere in search of the work we cannot find at home" (2). Her husband, a veterinary surgeon, is in the same situation, separated from his wife and children. He works in Kuwait for an emir. His job is to take care of animals "whose purpose is only to amuse" while "in Sudan cattle die from starvation or disease" (3). Thanks to that his daughters can have a good education, he can keep up with the latest research in his field and he earns the salary he deserves after so many years he spent in education. She expresses her concern about her generation, whose fate is as she says "separation" (2) from their country and family.

Gerry Smyth states that, "there are many ethnic communities in Britain, all experiencing different levels of assimilation and alienation" (Smyth). People who came to live in Britain want to become "good citizens" and their goal is to identify with the "mother country" (Smyth 261). Such a situation of absolute alienation from the original cultural identity and full assimilation is depicted by Aboulela in "Ostrich". Sumra's husband had changed, he refused to be identified with anything Arabic, which was the reason for Sumra's doubts about her life in Britain. There was no homesickness, no doubts, and no nostalgia in his thoughts. His identification with everything British, which was, on the other hand, so unfamiliar to Sumra, worried her. He disliked when Sumra walked a few

steps behind him, people would think that he behaves like a barbarian. He put his arm around her shoulder, which was another gesture that showed that although they were “Arabs and Africans”, they could be modern, too. He needed to prove that he had already changed and he deserved to be there (40). She had to walk without a cover on her hair and only imagine it because he was afraid of the reaction of other people. They could think that he forced her to wear it. It seemed to Sumra that life in immigration had changed him completely and he required the same from her. He refused all Sumra’s objections. He wanted to stay forever.

Fortunately for Sumra, not all the ties to his family and homeland were ruptured definitely. Sumra brought back many memories to him. Memories of what he was years ago. He himself felt that he had become someone else and she was still what she had been before because she did not lose her African identity and was “displaced yet intact, unchanged”. He said, “I envy you and you find that funny, don’t you, but it’s true” (53). Although he tried to find a new identity in the new country, refused almost everything what was connected with his homeland, somewhere deep in his mind there were still memories of his home, which he realized after her arrival.

Sumra, like Sudanese women from the story “Coloured Lights”, bitterly realized the reason for their immigration. “Shelves stacked with food, rows and rows of soft drinks, even the sugar of different types. For these things we had to leave our home...” (55). She expressed strong feeling of homesickness and loss of homeland when she compared Khartoum to London. “...in Khartoum I felt everything was real and our life in London a hibernation” (39).

The term hibernation is also used in the story “Souvenirs”. The author used it to describe the state of mind and body that is a reaction to the different cultural situation. Mannal, who visits Aberdeen, is lost in the cold of the city and she slept during all days and nights. It was her reaction to life’s confusion, which often followed people in the new unknown environment (Steiner). She was not only escaping from cold weather but she felt that she was not welcomed in her brother’s house. She felt unwanted and the sleep helped her to surmount it.

Another moment where the author depicts a negative reaction to different life circumstances appears in the story “Museum”. Sudanese student Shadia experienced her first days at university, she felt like “someone tossed around by monstrous waves, battered..., her eye bulged with fright, watered from the cold” (101). She joined a group of other students from the “Third World” and they shared their anxieties about life in Britain.

In the museum she looked out of the window and saw the overcast sky. She shivered with cold in spite of a couple of layers of clothes she was wearing. She compared life here to Hell. She says, “Hell is not only blazing fire, a part of it is freezing cold, torturous ice and snow. In Scotland’s winter you live a glimpse of this unseen world, feel the breath of it in your bones” (118). Cold and wet weather, indifferent and hurrying people play very negative role in immigrants’ lives. Memories of their warm and sunny homeland help them to moderate their homesickness and make their lives easier.

Lara

“Where do you come from? Where is home? ...‘Home’ is sometimes a place refused you categorically because you don’t ‘belong’” (Winning 235).

Lara’s father Taiwo came to Britain from Nigeria in 1949. The author compared his journey to Britain to “a ride on the whale to paradise”. But as we will see later his life in immigration was not always joyful. “Remember the man’s voice from Broadcasting house / Calling us over the air waves from England? / ‘London calling The Empire! Calling the Empire! Come in Nigeria! / I’m coming! I’m coming” (3)! “It was this siren call that lured Taiwo, from Lagos to the erstwhile colonial capital....Programs such as Caribbean Voices were broadcast in the colonies and added to the attraction of London’s calls, inducing migrants to seek their fortune in the metropolis. Ironically, the BBC program used to start with the phrase ‘Calling London’... (Stein 92).

After coming to Britain, Taiwo was full of emotions and hope. He arrived there to search for a better life to make his dreams come true. “See London, then die! I was desperate to get here” (3)! Like for the others the reason for his immigration was mainly economic because the economies of colonial countries “had been ruined by decades of colonial domination. Poverty and unemployment drove many to emigrate” (Brown). Euphoria and surprise were Taiwo’s first feelings. He was fascinated by London. “You can buy anything here, / there are so many shops, pubs on every street corner /and houses have all the modern conveniences” (4). His cousin compared Britain to a “fisherman’s bait”. It attracted a man, bit him and trapped him. Taiwo’s intention was to stay there for only five years, get a degree and leave. At the beginning he was not able to adapt to life in London for a long time. People were unfriendly and “lived like mice”. They hurried into their homes, locked their doors, streets were empty and quiet as if they all had died. Taiwo needed warm clothes, it was so cold because as he said, “the sun avoids this country...” (5). Nevertheless, even in spite of the tough reality, he did not surrender. In imaginary

letters to his mother he complained about the misery of life, missed his family and hoped for better times:

Tears are for sissies, women and nancy-boys. / Pain is shit to be flushed down the toilet. / I have taken my heart out, dug a grave for it / and said good riddance. I never want to see it again. / Man was put on this earth to suffer, but not me, / I will make a success of my life and one day / go to visit Mama with a suitcase full of green notes.(28)

Giving his life a perspective required to get a good job and earn money. However, getting a good job was very difficult for people from the colonies and if they got one they were forced to do only the inferior ones. After Taiwo's marriage to Ellen, he had to provide for his family and he "shelved his studies in order to greet the mortgage" (45). His only concern was to feed his "brood" in a job where his "migration dies" and his "soul suffocates". He perceived himself as "The Tired Boxer" (49).

Extremely tough reality of life in immigration was rendered in the moment when Taiwo's mother died. Lack of money did not allow him to travel to Nigeria. This time he compared his life to a "refrigerator" in which he had to survive. All close people from his family had gone and in order to live he "must erase their memory" and "be strong" because his life depended on it. He did not have home in Nigeria any longer; his new home was Britain. "I must return prosperous or be shamed. / You can't go to Europe and return a poor man. / When the roots of a tree die, the seeds are re-born. / My children are my seed, this is my home now" (57). He decided to prepare his children for the "harsh world" in his "new republic" (50). He said nothing about Nigeria neither to Ellen nor to Lara. It was his sacrifice. Homesickness was one of the strong feelings that accompanied Taiwo after his arrival in Britain and was later reduced by his love for Ellen. His intention to assimilate to new society and to live like a proper British subject was, in spite of all his problems, strong and irreversible. It was impossible for him to return home poor and unsuccessful. His only goal was happiness of his new family.

Lara as the third generation of immigrants felt to be British. Even the argument with her cousin Beatrice, which was mentioned in the previous chapter, did not convince her about the opposite. Beatrice insisted that Lara's mixed origin is not relevant and she will be always black and alien in Britain. She did not suffer from homesickness but feeling of alienation appeared in her life after being exposed to all life disillusionment:

“I denounced my patriarchal father, deconstructed / my childhood, regurgitated appropriated ideas like closing time vomit, I flirted with sensi, swooped / on trendy markets for cowries, batiks and sculptures, / I was walking irradiated automated diatribe, saw / the rapist in every home, warms in every phallus, / the bigot in all whites the victim in every black / woman, London was my war zone...”.(92)

It is obvious that although Lara’s assimilation was a completed process for her personally the white majority did not accept her yet. Hence, she decided to leave Britain and seek a place where she could belong. She hoped it would be Africa. When she finally arrived in Nigeria she expected that she would find herself among her people. Unfortunately, she was an alien there (Toplu) because as it has already been said, she was not black enough. She was an alien in both cultures - black and white alike.

9. Conclusion

Both of the books I used as the primary material for my undergraduate thesis differ in some aspects. They are written in different genres. Leila Aboulela's *Coloured Lights* is a book of short stories and Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* is a story in verse. While Aboulela's short stories are set in the present, Evaristo's characters go through their lives from their past to the present.

In both books I found some common features. Both of the writers are women and their books are partially autobiographical or they touch their own personality and private life. All the characters of their books are found in various life situations and face common social and cultural phenomena. They are immigrants who left their homelands for personal or economic reasons to seek a new opportunity in Britain. Some of them, who have already lived there for a long time or even were born there, are still not considered British by the majority society and are exposed to the same phenomena. Woman protagonists are shown in situation where they try to find their identity as women, Muslim women and black women.

Their personal struggles give rise to feelings of alienation, homesickness or separation and the immigrants often idealize their homelands and remember only positive things such as hot sun, warm weather, bright colours which the authors put in contrast to cold and inhospitable Britain.

The different social and cultural environment brings racial discrimination, which becomes inseparable part of their everyday lives, for example in schools or in the employment; the protagonists are chased because of the colour of their skin and different religious attitudes. For some of them the faith plays an important role, it gives them the strength to survive but some of them leave their faith and decide to assimilate and cut all ties to their previous lives. On the contrary, attempts to maintain them are depicted too. Cultural prejudice and barriers appear also in their home countries, when families are divided and children never meet their parents again or their parents disinherit them. In spite of all these difficulties, their efforts do not abandon them.

Nevertheless, in both books the discussed phenomena are covered differently. The protagonists of the books suffer from racial discrimination, they are exposed to its open manifestation in everyday life, but in *Lara* the racial and cultural identity is the key issue. Especially Taiwo after his arrival to Britain faces up to racism and also his white wife and their children must bear the burden of racial and cultural prejudice. They are attacked by

radical organizations such as the National Front; Taiwo has to work hard to feed the family and he is forced to surrender his goal to study and then find a good job and earn more money. Although racism and homesickness pursue Taiwo, his intention to assimilate into the new culture and the “new republic”, as he called Britain, is irreversible in spite of the absolute loss of his own cultural identity. His “toffee” child Lara seeks her identity in both cultures to find out that she does not belong to any of them. Being born as a British subject she is not considered British because of her black colour but paradoxically she experiences the same in Africa. She is not black enough there. For her British schoolmates she is from Africa but for her boyfriend she is not African enough. Her personal identity is not stable it changes and depends on the colour of her skin and the place where she is situated. Racial and cultural differences are the crucial problems in Lara.

The key issues for the protagonists of *Coloured Lights* are the ties to their homelands and religion. Homesickness plays an important part in their lives; feelings of separation and alienation are the dominant aspects. For women who are the main protagonists of the book separation from their families is much more painful. Leaving the homeland and renouncing all certainties put the women in complicated situations and they feel lost in the new country especially when they cannot find support from their families. Their Muslim identity gives them on one hand a feeling of safety and togetherness but, at the same time, it makes them more visible so they become subject to racial discrimination. The faith is the link between them and their homeland but not every protagonist keeps it. The loss of faith means for some of them the loss of their personal identity hence the feeling of alienation becomes stronger and it is accompanied with disillusionment. Loneliness and isolation bring them back to their faith and community of people where they find help. The reason for their immigration is mainly economic but under the weight of negative life experience they see their homeland as an ideal place though the reality is different.

It is possible to say that for the protagonists of both books seeking new identity and place in the new society is an endless and complicated process, which is influenced by various phenomena such as the colour of skin, gender, religion, country of origin, cultural traditions or social status. The difficulties of this process depend on both - the immigrants and the degree of their assimilation and on the majority society and its willingness to accept the newcomers.

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SUMMARY IN CZECH

Hlavním tématem této bakalářské práce je přiblížit problémy imigrantů žijících ve Velké Británii, jejichž příběhy jsou ztvárněny v knihách dvou současných britských autorek Leila Aboulela a Bernardine Evaristo. Hlavním motivem těchto lidí, kteří přicházejí do nové země, je najít tam vhodné místo pro lepší život a uniknout problémům v jejich vlastní zemi. Celý proces seznamování se a pronikání do kultury a života v nové zemi je provázen řadou problémů. Patří mezi ně například rasová diskriminace, nepochopení kulturních odlišností, odmítavý až nepřátelský postoj většinové společnosti, náboženská netolerance. Jakým způsobem se s těmito problémy vyrovnávají, do jaké míry a jak rychle se jim podaří splynout a najít své místo v nové společnosti je hlavním předmětem této práce.