On The Kindness of Enemies

In the 19th century, the tall, jagged ranges of the Caucasus Mountains separated India from Imperial Russia. The Muslim tribes of the mountains resisted Russian invasion and in doing so gained the support of Queen Victoria. Their leader, Imam Shamil, was praised in the British press for his bravery and resilience. By maintaining the independence of the Caucasus, Shamil was protecting British interests in India from the threat of Russian encroachment.

Thousands of feet above the Caspian and Black Seas, the Caucasus rose into misty, snowy summits. Rivers looped around the rocks. Imam Shamil’s villages were like rock fortresses, the houses embedded into the mountains as if they were a part of it. This world of stone resisted the Russians. Their soldiers struggled to climb, dodging the sharpshooters who threw burning logs and rocks down at them. They slipped trying to use the stony ledges as footholds. Shamil’s horses were trained for the steep, twisted ascent but the Russian horses collapsed with the effort.

A world apart from the Tsar’s court, the mountain tribes lived a life connected to the seasons and rhythms of their surroundings. When threatened, they hid in stone caves.
and birch forests. The moss-covered boulders and sycamore trees were as intimately known to them as the barren rocks and stretches of sandstones. They were fighting to keep hold of their homeland and their traditional way of life.

In *The Kindness of Enemies*, Princess Anna and her family are kidnapped from their estate in Georgia and dragged up the mountains to live as captives in Shamil’s harem. They are to be exchanged for Shamil’s son, Jamaleldin, who had been held hostage by the Tsar since he was eight years old.

On her long, arduous journey up the mountains, Princess Anna is given horses trained to swim across streams and climb vertical, zigzagged paths. When the horses are tired or the paths too dangerous, she must wade in deep mud or crawl on hands and knees over ravines. Although it is the beginning of a hot summer, there are avalanches of snow that will not melt until mid-July.

She passes villages embedded in the rocks, the houses peculiar in their design, they appear higgledy-piggledy. Entering one of them, she finds a hill inside a courtyard and rooms, like caverns, without windows. It takes three weeks of steady climbing before Shamil’s rock fortress looms up into view. Before the final climb, the Princess is surprised to find herself in an area surrounded by ferns and waterfalls. The rugged, harsh Caucasus Mountains are also home to azaleas and nosegays.

The kidnapping of the Princess tarnished Shamil’s reputation in Britain and, in 1859, after more than thirty years of resistance, the Caucasus fell to the Russians. Armed and
riding his white horse, Imam Shamil surrendered to the Russian commander. In his descent from the mountains, he was followed by the remnants of his bedraggled army, their torn banners held up high.

Leila Aboulela
2015

A version of this article first appeared in the Metro as ‘A Mountain of Resistance’ on 10 August 2015
Q&A with Leila Aboulela

Q: You were born to a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother, raised in Sudan but then moved to Aberdeen in your twenties. What were your first impressions of Scotland? How did you find the process of adapting and integrating into a new community? Were you homesick?

A: I arrived in Scotland with a four-year-old son and a two-week-old baby. My husband, Nadir, was working offshore on the North Sea oil rigs and it was our first time living alone, as we had been living with my parents since we got married. So, it was an exciting start but it wasn’t easy. I had romantic ideas about Scotland. It does have a romantic landscape, so does Sudan but that is one of the very few things they have in common! I was extremely homesick and unable to integrate into the mums and toddlers groups and school-gate friendships. For a while I taught statistics, which is what I had studied, but I wasn’t fulfilled. I felt that I was at a crossroads and started to look for other ways of fitting in.
Q: When did you start writing and how has your journey influenced your writing?

A: The place that gave me happiness and comfort when I first moved to Aberdeen was the Central Library. Growing up in Sudan with a scarcity of books, I deeply appreciated the luxury of being able to read in abundance and to read for free. Then for the first time ever, I tried my hand at writing a short story. I remember that when I surprised Nadir with it, he was impressed and said, ‘I can’t believe you wrote this!’ I started to attend creative writing workshops at the University of Aberdeen and then at the library. Those were led by the writer-in-residence, Todd McEwen, who encouraged me and showed my stories to his editor. All the other writers I met at the workshops were welcoming and genuinely interested in my writing. For the first time since arriving in Britain, I started to make friends and to feel that I belonged.

Q: Where did your inspiration for The Kindness of Enemies come from and how did the novel evolve in your mind? Did you conceive the two narrative strands – one contemporary and one historical – from the very beginning?

A: A few years ago, I wrote a BBC radio play, The Lion of Chechnya, inspired by the life of Imam Shamil. There were some aspects of the story that I wanted to develop into a full-length novel, namely that of his son, Jamaleldin.
Jamaleldin was taken away from his father at the age of eight and brought up by the Tsar as his godson. Hurt and humiliated, Shamil did everything he could to bring his son back. But how did Jamaleldin, after experiencing modernity and sophistication, feel about re-joining the mountain tribes? Russian and Western historians cast him as a tragic figure but my instincts were that Jamaleldin’s position was more complex; he too belonged to Chechnya and he too, eventually, returned to Islam.

Although I had never been to the Caucasus, researching Shamil’s life threw up many wonderful descriptions of the mountains, details which I wanted to work with and shape as a backdrop for a novel. I read those of Tolstoy’s works which were set in the Caucasus and watched Russian YouTube films and serials. It didn’t matter that I couldn’t understand what the actors were saying; the landscape was what I was after.

When I started writing The Kindness of Enemies, I introduced a present-day character to act as a bridge connecting us to the past. Natasha Hussein is a half-Russian, half-Sudanese lecturer of History, living in Scotland. In 2011, I was intrigued by articles in the British newspapers which reported that, under new anti-terror legislations, university staff would be expected to inform on Muslim students vulnerable to radicalisation. What if Natasha, eager to distance herself from being Muslim, sets out to inform on those of her students who were ‘at risk’?
Q: Your novel explores ideas of religion, language, culture and identity that seem particularly relevant in Britain today. What does it mean to be a Muslim in a secular society? Do you think that questions of allegiance and belonging are more urgent now than ever?

A: To be a practising person of any faith nowadays is to swim against the tide. But it also means having access to ancient wisdom and guidance that modern society devalues but is unable to replace.

The rise of terrorism and the ability of groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS to inflict destruction and mass murder puts Muslims living in the West under scrutiny and suspicion. But there is a more positive narrative taking place in parallel to this tension. Slowly, Muslims are joining the mainstream. Whether it’s Asda selling halal meat or a greater awareness of Ramadan – the trend is heading towards a time when, instead of a negative stereotype, the word ‘Muslim’ could carry infinite possibilities and relate to people from disparate backgrounds who may practise in different ways or even not at all.

Q: Who are your favourite writers and who influences your writing?

A: When I was growing up in Sudan my favourite writers were Dostoevsky, Charlotte Brontë, and Daphne du Maurier. I also read a lot of Somerset Maugham. Later when I moved to Britain, Tayeb Salih’s The Wedding of Zein became the novel about Sudan that best expressed what I
was homesick for. But I would say that my writing is mostly influenced by women writers such as Anita Desai, Jean Rhys, Buchi Emecheta and Ahdaf Soueif – all of whom I read after I started writing.

Q: What are you working on at the moment?

A: I am finishing up a collection of short stories about women in various stages of their lives. Schoolgirls falling out, first love, a teenager avenging her father’s murder, a single woman joining a revolution, another in her thirties meeting a prospective suitor, a bride getting used to her new life. Then morning sickness, parenthood and divorce. In the story I am working on at the moment, a successful middle-aged woman meets her favourite author fifteen years after the writer had snubbed her at a literary event.

I’m also planning a new novel about three Muslim women on a road trip around Britain. As they bicker and banter, the tensions between them grow, and through modern methods of communication and social media their lives stretch out to loyalties in different continents.
For Discussion

• ‘... we have to grope our way through so much filth and rubbish in order to reach home! And we have no one to show us the way. Homesickness is our only guide.’

Why do you think Leila Aboulela has chosen these lines from Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* as an epigraph to her novel?

• Natasha believes that she has an ‘unfortunate name’ in Hussein and nags her mother and stepfather to change it when she arrives in London in 1990 (p.4). How important are names in the novel? Do they determine identity?

• What do you now understand by the term ‘jihad’? How does this compare with your thoughts prior to reading *The Kindness of Enemies*?

• How are the contemporary and historical narratives woven together in *The Kindness of Enemies* to reveal deeper insights into identity and belonging? Consider especially how Anna’s story, that of a stranger in a strange land, mirrors Natasha’s.
• What does it mean to be a Muslim and a woman in the world today? Does anything surprise you in Leila Aboulela’s presentation of Malak, a single mother and actress who is devoted to keeping fit? Compare and contrast Malak with Shamil’s women.

• Explore the relationship between Natasha and Oz. What do you think they derive from each other?

• ‘Shamil and his people were the goodies; the Russians were the baddies.’ (p.14) Do you agree with Oz?

• ‘The Stain of Al-Qaeda has Reached Scotland’ (p.286)
  How do the media, reportage and hearsay distort truth throughout the novel?

• ‘The mountains were filled with the displaced. Here among Shamil’s men were captives and deserters. Their wellbeing was a function of how much they integrated or made themselves useful . . . their loyalty would always be suspect, their loved ones far away.’ (p.229)
  Consider immigration today. How far does this statement hold true for those moving from one country to another?

• Natasha yearns for an ‘identifiable place’ where she can ‘belong’ (p.289). How does she begin to reconcile the complexities of her upbringing by the end of the novel? Does Jamaleldin attain any peace by the end? What does it mean to belong?
If you enjoyed *The Kindness of Enemies*, you might also like . . .

*Hadji Murad* by Leo Tolstoy

*Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

*Good Hope Road* by Sarita Mandanna

*The Moor’s Account* by Laila Lalami

*The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Richard Flanagan

*The Year of the Runaways* by Sunjeev Sahota

*The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini

*The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri

*The Map of Love* by Ahdaf Soueif
Have you read *Lyrics Alley*?

Longlisted for the 2011 Orange Prize for Fiction

It is the dawn of the 1950s and from the bustling streets of Khartoum to cosmopolitan Cairo, the sun is setting on the British Empire. Mahmoud, the head of a powerful Sudanese dynasty, has grand ambitions. But there are tensions between his wives: one is bound to traditions which confine her to an open-air kitchen, whilst the other is a modern Egyptian woman intent on dividing the household. Then Nur, Mahmoud’s brilliant son and heir to his business empire, suffers a near-fatal accident, leaving the family to face an uncertain future.

Moving between Sudan and Egypt, this is a heart-wrenching portrait of a family in turmoil, a love lost and history in the making.

‘Beautiful’ *Marie Claire*

‘A story for all the senses, one to be savoured and enjoyed’ *Financial Times*
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