Something Old, Something New by Leila Aboulala

Themes

Relationships
Culture
Family
Faith
Language/ Communication
Change

Plot
This story shows the journey of a relationship from a first meeting in an Edinburgh cafe to a wedding in Sudan. Structure is used carefully to add depth to our understanding of the man’s background as we move from the setting and planning of the wedding back to how he met his future wife in Scotland and even beyond that to his past failures and disappointments. Their love is tested by the man’s experiences in Sudan as he slowly becomes more accepting of being part of her family. The ending brings a climax with their marriage as he feels her touch for the first time and is comforted.

Form

Short story is used to show the journey of their relationship & the man learning acceptance of her culture & family. The epiphany comes when they are finally married & he is “choked by a kind of brightness,” the positive light imagery foreshadows her touch, “how soft she was,” and he admits and is able to communicate with her properly for the first time, “It’s been tough for me.”

Omniscient narrator – 3rd person perspective – distances us from the characters originally but it draws us in by the end through the vivid description of the setting & culture. This could be symbolic of the couple’s relationship, distanced by the culture but then becoming closer, once they’ve overcome their obstacles and can touch.

Structure:

Lines 82-110- flashback to the first time he met and spoke to her in a restaurant in Edinburgh – shows the development of their relationship.

Lines 111- 125- exposition of his past from school to failing his third year in Medicine, foreshadows the robbery of the passport and his immature reaction to it.

Lines 126- 178- another flashback meeting as she serves him at the restaurant and we learn about her failed marriage and his previous conversion to Islam, they are both giving up aspects of their old life. Reflects a person’s ability to change & adapt.

Lines 221- 242- introduced to her family at the family home ‘as part of a group,”
Analysis: The writer uses the initial setting description of Sudan to reflect the main character’s disturbed feelings towards the country and perhaps create the suggestion that he is still very new to his converted faith and relationship. The old in the title could suggest the past and how he has changed, and the new could be how his union with this woman and her country is changing and transforming him. The heat appears to have stripped everything away, ‘bone-coloured... purity...bareness’ which the omniscient narrator explains reminds him of touching a human bone, an ambiguous image which might suggest this is a journey to discover or reveal his inner identity and truth. Without names, the two main characters are distanced from us initially, however the careful dialogue and omniscient narrator soon connects us and draws us into the complex relationship.

Language

Lines 1-81- arrival in Sudan and taken to his hotel by his future wife and her brother. Setting used to reflect the difficulties he’s needed to overcome to marry her, “bone-coloured sky,” skeletons have connotations of death. The writer uses the initial setting description of Sudan to reflect the main character’s disturbed feelings towards the country and perhaps create the suggestion that he is still very new to his converted faith and relationship. The old in the title could suggest the past and how he has changed, and the new could be how his union with this woman and her country is changing and transforming him. The heat appears to have stripped everything away, ‘bone-coloured... purity...bareness’ which the omniscient narrator explains reminds him of touching a human bone, an ambiguous image which might suggest this is a journey to discover or reveal his inner identity and truth. Without names, the two main characters are distanced from us initially, however the careful dialogue and omniscient narrator soon connects us and draws us into the complex relationship.

Final moments, use of light imagery, “kind of brightness,” 546 – quite a spiritual experience. Could reflect their success, like the light at the end of the tunnel?

Why does she feel sorry for him? Does this simply show that she cares? Does it show that they are finally allowed/able to communicate their feelings?