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# **CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN LEILA ABOULELA'S *THE TRANSLATOR***

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## **Abstract**

Leila Aboulela (1964- ) is a Sudanese contemporary novelist. Her reputation as a pioneer of 'halal fiction' and her classification as a multicultural and postcolonial writer are the main reasons for an investigation of her novel. She is mainly concerned with the conflict evident between cultures. She always tries to find a middle way out of these cultural encounters. *The Translator* is an embodiment for her thought. It depicts the life of a Muslim translator in Scotland, a woman who can not assimilate with the other. This article aims to tackle the barriers which prevent her from assimilation. It also highlights the way through which Aboulela bridges the gap between the Sudanese and Scottish culture, such contradicting cultures. The narrative techniques employed by Aboulela such as contrast and allusion help the researcher to carry out her job and cover this multicultural novel. The researcher tries to relate Aboulela's views to the theories of cultural conflict in postcolonial and multicultural contemporary fiction.

**Key Words: Multiculturalism, Assimilation, Translation, Islam, Religious Conversion, Nostalgia and Halal Fiction.**

## **Introduction**

This research handles the cultural encounters in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*. It explores the life of a Sudanese Muslim woman called Sammar in Scotland; she is a translator who translates Islamic terms and articles from Arabic to English for Rae, a Middle-East historian and a lecturer in Third World politics. The paper discusses the elements which make her resist the other's culture. "Sammar and Rae personify, respectfully and realistically, the cultural struggles playing out in the today's world" (Stidham 61). The focus of the chapter also is to explore these struggles and possible reconciliations.

Sammar cannot assimilate with the other; she always feels alone and alienated. For her, the Scottish streets are "a maze of culture shock" (70). She likes to watch people out of the window, but she does not want them to see her. She adheres to her Muslim and African identity. As a result, she cannot change because "change implies the capacity to relinquish at least aspects of a given identity" (Robins 61). Nostalgia, religion, weather, language and the European aggressive attitude towards Islam are among the elements which prevent Sammar from assimilating into the European culture.

### **Nostalgia**

Nostalgia is a way through which Sammar resists the Western culture. John J. Sue explains that "nostalgia has provided a means of expressing resistance for individuals who otherwise lacked the power to change their circumstances more directly" (4). She always longs for her homeland. "Four years and her soul had dived in the past, nothing in the present could touch it" (29). Her failure to coexist with others makes her seek happiness through remembering the past. Nostalgia has a redeeming value because it "enables a person to escape present mediocrity by resorting to a splendid past" (Greenberg 206). She has some happy memories which she misses and yearns for. For example, she remembers the days when she was going to school with her friends; she misses even the African food. These memories make her feel significant as nostalgia keeps "the wolf of insignificance from the door" (Bellow 190).

Moreover, she always remembers how much African people suffer. Inside her, there is a "sheer dust and meagreness. Poverty and Sunshine" of Africa (16). Through remembering the African people and how they suffer, Sammar plays the ethical role assumed by Paul Ricoeur who points out in his "Memory and Forgetting" that "To memorize the victims of history – the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten – should be a task for all of us at the end of this century" (qtd. in Erfan 87). However, her nostalgia is reflective because she does not seek going home back to rebuild. There are two types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. "While restorative nostalgia returns and rebuilds one homeland with paranoiac determination, reflective nostalgia fears return" (Boym 15). Thus, she does not succeed as an intellectual because her memories of the African suffering lead to nothing. Edward Said demonstrates that the task of the intellectual "is explicitly to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the sufferings of others" ("Representations of the Intellectual" 44).

Also, Sammar's nostalgia does not remove her sense that the European country in which she lives is superior to her African country for which she longs. She unconsciously feels that her people and country are inferior. For example, she wonders that her aunt knows roller blades: "Roller blades, how did they find out about things like that?" (87). Her aunt who lives in the Sudan is expected to be ignorant and backward from her perspective. Thus, it could be said that nostalgia in Sammar's case is a "social disease" (Stewart 23). It is related to isolation, lack of communication and passivity; it isolates her from the outside world. She does not employ these memories to succeed in the present. Instead, she imprisons herself in the past.

## **Religion**

Sammar is a Muslim who lives among people whose religion is not Islam, people who celebrate Christmas but she does not. This religious difference creates a kind of conflict inside her. When she sees a letter sent to Rae from his daughter, she feels astonished because she finds a sentence like "Get Well Soon, Dad" (104). She finds "the wording strange without 'I wish' or 'I pray', it was an order, and she wondered if the child was taught to believe that her father's health was in his hands, under his command" (104). She is a Muslim while some of those people she lives among are secular who speculate that "God is out playing golf ... God has put up this elaborate solar system and left it to run itself. It does not need Him to maintain it or sustain it in anyway. Mankind is self-sufficient" (42). Muslims are classified as terrorists in Europe. In his introduction to the revised edition of *Covering Islam* (1997), Said states that "Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered, discussed, and apprehended either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists" (28). Said also says in *The Politics of Dispossession* that "the word 'Islam' imputes a unified and monolithic religious and cultural system, from which it is a small step to allude to the darkness and strangeness of Muslims, Arabs, their culture, religion etc" (373). There are a lot of situations in the novel which indicate how the Western people are sensitive to the Muslim Sammar. For example, the head of the department summons her to say "I have no problem at all with the way you dress" (100). Ironically, this means that the head of the department does not accept her being different from the Scottish people. "This instance of narrative irony points to the often hidden expression of disapproval, in that the patronizing assurance of acceptance is part of the covert hostility towards Sammar" (Steiner 10).

This aggressive attitude towards Islam does not push Sammar to defend Islam. She does not meet the criteria of the translator supposed by Sherry Simon who assumes that the

translator is an influential cultural mediator who can employ transition to serve political issues (58). All what she does is that she tries to explain Islamic terms for Rae. She must have recognized that "Islam in Europe is a challenge, not a muse for romantic fantasies. A free and unbiased debate is needed" (Tibi 164). This attack on Islam makes her feel estranged and pushes her to resist the Western culture through sticking to her religion; prayers are her "only challenge" (16). In her days "the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers" (16). This gives Aboulela a chance to elaborate on the Muslim rituals to help the Western reader know about Islam. This Muslim trend establishes Aboulela as 'halal fiction' pioneer. Fadia Faqir remarks, "Leila Aboulela's halal fiction, which propagates an Islamic world view, is also a good example of transcultural and transnational literature" (169). Maryam Ismail points out that halal fiction "is entertaining without murders, illicit affairs, bad language, and other wasted wordage on heinous acts". "To say this does not mean that Aboulela deals only with 'Islamically correct' characters. There are pork-eating and whiskey-drinking Muslims in her fiction; what makes her writing 'Islamic' is not religious correctness or didacticism" (Ghazoul). There are some examples in *The Translator* to clarify this point. The Muslim waiters who serve Rae are characterized by hypocrisy and duplicity. "Their women were covered, seldom glimpsed, while they earned their living serving iced lemonade to pool-side beauties. ... poured whisky, when alcohol was forbidden to them" (61).

### **Religious Barrier**

It is not easy for Sammar to contact with the Scottish people although she knows their language. "In this country, when she spoke to people, they seemed wary, on their guard as if any minute she would say something out of place, embarrassing" (6). "Language is the key to a person's self-identity. It enables the person to express emotions, share feelings, tell stories, and convey complex messages and knowledge" (Kim and Mattila 2). Her 'self-identity' is Arabic, but she lives among people whose mother-tongue is English. Although she is a translator from Arabic to English, she does not feel confident in her English. In this regard, she is an example for racialized immigrants who "have subtle difficulties with the language despite their ability to speak English fluently" (Agnew 41). This is clear when she goes to the library; the sight of the librarians makes her nervous. "Sammar felt like a helpless immigrant who didn't know any English, she imagined the English words lifting away from her brain, evaporating, forming a light mist" (13). This feeling is not real. She is a translator at an established European University. So, her English must be perfect. Her English is also proved to be very well as it is

evident in her conversations with Rae regardless of the fact that she sometimes faces a linguistic problem that is some Arabic words do not have their equals in English. This enhances that "There are aspects of culture and religion that cannot be translated or accurately transmitted from one culture to the other" (Alaa 25). As a result, she uses some Arabic terms with their Arabic pronunciation but in English letters.

Use of Arabic words in English has a lot of implications. First, it does not mean weakness in the speaker's linguistic abilities. It is a way for cultural expansion "in which linguistic options are expanded through the importation of loan transfers, calques, and the like" (Tymoczko 24). Second, the fact that some Arabic words are untranslatable into English means that there is an evident conflict between English and Arabic. Third, it indicates that universality of English is limited; it cannot play the supposed role of communicating marginalized people's ideologies. This contradicts the established idea that "Muslim narratives in English prove that the English language ... can be utilized as a sophisticated Muslim currency of credible communication" (Malak 7). Fourth, her attachment to Arabic implies her resistance to linguistic genocide which "involves "the systematic replacement of an indigenous language with the language of an outside, dominant group, resulting in a permanent language shift and the death of the indigenous language (Day 164) .

### **Environmental Barrier (Weather)**

The Scottish cold weather represents a major barrier between Sammar and the Scottish culture; it is too cold to endure. One time, she sits "armed against cold" as if cold weather is a personified enemy (43). This motif of hostility recurs when she describes the winter water as "hostile" (3); it indicates how much she hates the European weather. She stays at home "watching from her window people doing what she couldn't do: children walking to school through the swirling leaves" (3). She feels cold to the extent that she stays four days at home without enough food. When she goes out, she goes out "famished, rummaging the shops for food, dizzy with effort" (3). She wants to have a car just to "escape the weather" (12). In fact, the problem does not lie in the cold weather. It lies in the fact that Sammar compares the Scottish cold weather to the African hot one. When she visits the Sudan, she sits on the porch where there is "no breeze, no moisture in the air, all the heat, dryness, desert dust" (136). She does not comprehend that Africa and Europe are totally different environments if they are not contradictory.

### **Conversion: A Medium of Communication**

Despite the varied barriers which alienate the African Muslim Sammar from the Scottish culture, Aboulela proves that the gap between the two cultures could be bridged. Aboulela tries to find a middle way out of these conflicts. She does so through converting the agonistic Rae to Islam, making him marry Sammar. The main obstacle between Sammar and Rae is the difference of religion. She is a devout Muslim for whom religion is an identity maker but Rae is agnostic, "one who refuses either to affirm or deny the existence of a god" (Smith 12). She believes that the problem could be easily solved. The solution from her perspective is that Rae says al-shahadah and brings her marriage gift. She ignores that "Conversion is not primarily incited and guided by dominant discourses, language, or social structures, but rather prompted by particular personal beliefs, quests, and desires" (Mc Ginty 9). She does not recognize that Islam for him is an academic interest; he accepts "Muslims' own vision of the Qur'an, what they say about it" (89). However, Aboulela suddenly converts Rae to Islam to convey a religious message which is that faith "comes direct from Allah" (198). Here, the halal fiction pioneer alludes directly to the holy Quran. God says in surah *Al-Qasas* line 56: "You [Prophet] cannot guide everyone you love to the truth; it is God who guides whoever He will: He knows best those who will follow guidance" (qtd. in M.A.S. Abdel Haleem 393).

Although this conversion may be convincing from the Muslim perspective, it is not dramatic; it is not clear how Rae changes his mind. While the narrator gives an access to Sammar's mind revealing her thoughts and emotions, he/she never allows the reader to know what revolves inside Rae's mind. The narrator employs only an external perspective towards Rae, focusing on what he does and says. "Conversion triggers profound questions to the self; it heightens the awareness and prompts reflections of who one is, who one was, and where one is heading" (Mc Ginty 6). Rae is never shown asking any of these questions. Conversion does not come suddenly. Conversion is "a process over time, not a single event ... contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations" (Rambo 5). This sudden conversion is employed by the author to serve dramatic purpose which is to close the novel with a happy ending. Aboulela employs *deus ex machina* classical technique which refers to "any arbitrary plot device that resolves a dilemma in a story or play (Quinn 116). This proves that "Multiculturalists tend to be intellectual magpies, picking up

attractive ideas and incorporating them into their theories without worrying too much about how might they fit together" (Barry 252).

On the other hand, some critics attribute this conversion to the possibility that Rae is affected by what Sammar communicates to him about Islam via translation. "It seems legitimate to affirm that Rae's conversion to Islam is the outcome of a process that took place during his contact with Sammar" (Ayres 172). Ayres tries to attribute this conversion to the power of translation asserting that "Probably, by means of her translation of the Qu'ran— along with discussions between them over the issues brought up —, the characters in question interacted in a communicative process performed during the translation activity" (172). This influence of Sammar contradicts the established idea that the colonizer dominates the colonized. It is Sammar, the colonized, who exerts her power upon Rae, the colonizer; not vice versa. Ayres points out that "it is the dominated who translates its own culture for the dominating to comprehend it" (165).

Whether convincing or not, Rae's conversion leads to a cross-cultural assimilation which could result into a new generation with a sharing peaceful vision. This cross-cultural marriage "can be read as an affirmation of multiculturalism, of the hybridity between cultures, and of "new blood" coming in from across borders and boundaries to supplement existing strains" (25). Thus, Aboulela contradicts what Rudyard Kipling establishes as a matter of fact in the first line of his poem 'The Ballad of East and West', "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (qtd. in Schouten 2).

## **Conclusion**

The *Translator* is a traditional romance between a man and a woman with a happy union ending. However, what is not traditional is the way through which they are reunited. Aboulela reunites them through employing an unexpected tool: religious conversion. She proves that cultural barriers could be overcome through conversion.



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