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Mohamed Khider University of Biskra
Faculty of Letters and Languages
Department of English Language and Literature

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Translating Islam and Culture: Building Cross-Cultural Bridges in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

Submitted and Defended by:
Khodheir Nihal

Supervisor:
Dr. Hamed Halima

Board of Examiners

Dr. Mourad Chemmouri	MAA	University of Biskra	Presedent
Dr. Lamdjed Elhamel	MCA	University of Biskra	Examiner
Dr. Halima Hamed	MCA	University of Biskra	Supervisor

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Dedication

To my beloved parents,

your love, prayers, and sacrifices have been the backbone of this journey. Thank you for always believing in me, even when I doubted myself.

To my amazing siblings,

your constant support, encouragement, and presence have been my anchor and strength. I am endlessly grateful to share this life with you.

To my best friend Imane and my cousin Mounira,

Thank you for being my cheerleader, my safe place, and my constant light.

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates Leila Aboulela's novel *The Translator* as a significant work of cultural and religious translation that builds bridges between Islamic world and the West. through the story of Sammar, a Sudanese Muslim widow navigating life in Scotland. Drawing on postcolonial theory, translation theory, and feminist criticism, the study examines how the novel reclaims Islamic values from the margins and resists reductive Western narratives about Muslim identity. Rather than portraying Islam as rigid or oppressive, Aboulela presents it as a deeply personal, guiding force in Sammar's life, one that brings clarity, peace, and a sense of belonging in the face of alienation. The novel challenges dominant discourses by showing that faith and modernity, East and West, can coexist within a single narrative and individual. The research also analyzes the use of language and silence as metaphors for cultural displacement and emotional fragmentation. Sammar's bilingual experience reflects the broader challenges of negotiating between cultures, and her struggle to be understood becomes a powerful commentary on the politics of voice and representation. By portraying Muslim characters with authenticity and presenting Islam through an insider lens, Aboulela dismantles stereotypes and fosters a more empathetic understanding of cross-cultural experiences. The dissertation argues that *The Translator* serves not only as a narrative of personal transformation but also as a subtle political and cultural statement. Ultimately, this study affirms that Aboulela's work contributes to a growing body of literature that challenges monolithic portrayals of Muslims and offers fiction as a tool for building intercultural dialogue, compassion, and mutual respect.

Keywords:

Feminism, *The Translator*, Islam, cultural translation, postcolonial literature.

ترجمة الإسلام والثقافة: بناء جسور بين الثقافات في رواية المترجمة للكاتبة ليلى أبو العلا

تتناول هذه الأطروحة رواية " *المترجمة*" للكاتبة ليلى أبو العلا بوصفها عملاً أدبيًا رفيعًا في مجال الترجمة الثقافية والدينية، يسهم في بناء جسور فكرية وإنسانية بين الرؤى الإسلامية والغربية. تركّز الدراسة على الكيفية التي تنسج بها أبو العلا، بأسلوب دقيق ومتقن، من خلال سرد قصة سمر، الأرملة السودانية المسلمة التي تعيش تجربة الاغتراب في اسكتلندا. من خلال الاستناد إلى نظريات ما بعد الاستعمار، تتضمن مفاهيم مثل الاستشراق كما طرحه إدوارد سعيد، والتهجين كما تناوله هومي بهابها، ومفهوم المستضعف لدى غاياتري سبيفاك، إلى جانب توظيف مقاربات النقد النسوي التي تُعنى بتمثيل المرأة وتفكيك الهيمنة الذكورية، كما تستكشف هذه الدراسة كيف تستعيد الرواية القيم الإسلامية من هامش الخطاب الثقافي الغربي، وتقاوم الصور النمطية المبسّطة التي ترسمها السرديات الغربية عن الهوية المسلمة. لا يقدَّم الإسلام هنا كمنظومة جامدة أو قمعية، بل يُصوَّر كقوة إيمانية شخصية، تُشكّل مصدر إلهام وطمأنينة وانتماء عميق في حياة سمر، خاصة في ظل شعورها بالاغتراب. تتحدى الرواية بذلك الخطابات المهيمنة، مبرزة إمكانية التعايش بين الإيمان والحداثة، وبين الشرق والغرب، في إطار سردي واحد وشخصية واحدة. كما تتناول الدراسة استخدام اللغة والصمت بوصفهما رمزين دالّين على الاغتراب الثقافي والانكسار النفسي. وتُعبّر التجربة الثنائية اللغة التي تعيشها سمر عن التوترات الأوسع في التفاوض بين الثقافات، بينما يصبح نضالها من أجل أن يُفهم صوتها تأملاً نقديًا في سياسات التمثيل والهوية. من خلال تقديم شخصيات مسلمة إنسانية ومعقدة، وتصوير الإسلام من زاوية داخلية، تعمل أبو العلا على تفكيك الأنماط السائدة وتعزيز فهم أكثر عمقًا وتعاطفًا للتجارب العابرة للثقافات. وتؤكد هذه الأطروحة أن " *المترجمة*" ليست فقط قصة تحوّل فردي، بل تُعدّ كذلك بيانًا ثقافيًا وسياسيًا دقيقًا. وفي الختام، تُثبت الدراسة أن أعمال ليلى أبو العلا تُساهم بفاعلية في إثراء الأدب المعاصر الذي يرفض الصور النمطية الأحادية عن المسلمين، وتقدّم الرواية كأداة حيوية لبناء حوار بين الثقافات، قائم على التفاهم، والتعاطف، والاحترام المتبادل.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

النسوية، " *المترجمة*" ، الإسلام، الترجمة الثقافية، أدب ما بعد الاستعمار.

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General Introduction

1. Background of the Study

In much of Western media and literature, Islam has long been subject to misrepresentation, often framed through lenses of violence, fanaticism, or the oppression of women. This orientalist tendency, as outlined by Edward Said, reinforces a binary view of a civilized, rational West versus a backward, irrational East (Said 272). Representations of Muslim women, in particular, have frequently been reduced to tropes of silence, passivity, and victimhood, serving as symbols of Islamic "otherness" in contrast to Western ideals of freedom and individuality (Shaheen 20). These depictions fail to reflect the diversity, agency, and spiritual depth present in real Muslim lives.

Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) offers a deliberate counter-narrative to such portrayals. Through the character of Sammar, a devout Muslim Sudanese widow living in Scotland, Aboulela provides an insider's view of Islam as a meaningful and empowering force. Rather than portraying Islam as restrictive or foreign, the novel presents it as a source of moral clarity, comfort, and resilience (Aboulela 45–46). Sammar's faith is not a barrier to communication or integration, but a central part of her identity that she carries with dignity and confidence, even in the face of misunderstanding and isolation.

By crafting a Muslim female protagonist who is both spiritually committed and emotionally complex, Aboulela resists the dominant Western narratives that often frame Muslim identity as incompatible with modernity or autonomy. Her literary approach humanizes Muslim subjectivities and invites Western readers to engage with Islam beyond the lens of fear or judgment. Aboulela's fiction "translates" Islam into a cultural space of empathy and dialogue, enabling cross-cultural understanding through intimate storytelling (Geetha 82). In doing so, *The Translator* becomes more than just a narrative, it becomes a literary intervention, correcting distorted representations and illustrating how fiction can build bridges between misrepresented cultures and readers willing to listen.

2. The Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing presence of Islamic communities in the West, literature exploring the nuanced intersections between Islam, culture, and cross-cultural dialogue remains limited. Aboulela's novel The Translator presents an opportunity to analyze how Islamic cultural values and practices are understood and translated in a western setting, contributing to the discourse on cultural hybridity, identity, and the challenges of intercultural understanding. This research seeks to investigate about how Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* navigates the complexities of translating Islamic culture and beliefs across different cultural contexts, within a western framework. As the novel examines the experiences of Sammar a Sudanese Muslim woman, who attempts to reconcile her Islamic identity in a secular British society.

3. Research Questions

This study is mainly based on the following questions:

• How does the novel resist the misconception of Islam in Western society?

• How does language become a tool for cross-cultural understanding/ communication?

• How does the novel challenge Western feminist stereotypes about Muslim women?

• How does the novel highlight the dual performance of translating both literal and metaphorical?

• How does the novel explore the themes of hybridity, otherness, feminism, and faith through the protagonist?

4. Research Aims

This study aims to explore how did Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* challenge Western misrepresentations of Islam by offering a nuanced, insider portrayal of Muslim identity and faith. It investigates how the novel functions as a form of cultural translation, using literature as a bridge between Islamic and Western worldviews. The research focuses on the intersections of religion, gender, and identity in the life of Sammar, the protagonist, and

examines how her experiences as a Muslim woman in the West complicate dominant cultural binaries. Additionally, the study analyzes the symbolic use of language, silence, and bilingualism as expressions of cultural hybridity and emotional displacement. Ultimately, the thesis seeks to demonstrate how Aboulela's work contributes to postcolonial and Islamic feminist discourse, while fostering empathy and intercultural dialogue through fiction.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, analytic methodology, grounded in postcolonial and cultural theories, to explore how Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* engages with the dual acts of translation both linguistic and cultural, as a means of building cross-cultural bridges. Through close textual analysis, the research examines central themes such as identity, hybridity, and in-betweenness, and more, revealing how the novel navigates the complexities of Muslim identity in a Western context. Additionally, the study incorporates an overview of Aboulela's biography and cultural background to better understand the personal and historical conditions that influenced her literary perspective. The analysis is supported by a range of scholarly sources, including critical essays, academic articles, books, and previous dissertations, to ensure the research is well-informed, rigorous, and contextually grounded.

6. Structure of the Thesis

This research is divided into three chapters. The first chapter establishes the theoretical and contextual framework by examining the Western portrayal of Islam and Arab Muslims, with particular focus on the misrepresentation of Muslim women. It also explores the role of cultural translation in Arab-Islamic Anglophone literature and the intersection of literature with key concepts such as language, identity, hybridity, otherness, Islamic feminism, and faith. The second chapter offers an in-depth analysis of these cultural and literary themes as they unfold in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*, highlighting how the novel engages with and

reclaims Islamic identity within a Western setting. The third chapter focuses on the act of translation both linguistic and cultural, as a central tool for bridging East and West, ultimately culminating in the symbolic and literal union of Sammar and Rae through mutual understanding and respect.

Chapter One

Theoretical Framework

1. Introduction

The relationship between Islam and the West has been historically shaped not only by political encounters and territorial conflicts but also by deeply entrenched cultural and religious misunderstandings. From the early medieval period to the present day, Islam has often been viewed through a distorted lens in the Western viewpoint. A view that has been shaped more by polemic, fear, and ideological needs than by informed understanding. Western portrayals of Islam have frequently emphasized themes such as fanaticism, desire, and violence, while ignoring or misrepresenting the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural richness of the Islamic world (Palmer and Gallab 1).

In his seminal work *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image (1960)*, Norman Daniel an eminent historian on the Middle Ages and intercultural relations, argues that much of the Western conception of Islam was "essentially theological in origin and polemical in purpose," leading to an image that was more reflective of Western anxieties and prejudices than of Islam itself. He highlights how medieval Christian writers lacking access to accurate translations and influenced by religious hostility constructed a version of Islam that served to reinforce their own ideological and moral superiority. These misconceptions have proven to be enduring, continually influencing Western media, literature, and political discourse well into the modern era. (Daniel)

This chapter will investigate how Western misconceptions about Islam that is shaped by Orientalist discourse as theorized by Edward Said in his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* (1978) and colonial narratives continue to influence contemporary representations of Muslims, particularly Arab and Muslim women. In addition to drawing on concepts such as cultural hybridity developed by Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, translation as a form of cultural mediation, and postcolonial resistance, the chapter will also explore how Muslim writers, especially Arab women writing in English, challenge and reframe these

misrepresentations, through the lens of Halal fiction, Anglophone Arab literature, and feminist postcolonial theories, mainly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory Can The Subaltern Speak?.

1.2. The Western Portrayal of Islam and Arab Muslims

Driss Redouani an associate professor at Moulay Ismail University, School of Arts and Humanities, Morocco. In an article under the title "The Representation of Arabs and Muslims in Western Media he argues that:

> the Western representation of Muslims and Arabs is not a recent fabrication but it had been operational and deep-rooted in the West conceptualization ever since the first contacts with Arabs and Muslims. Down to the Middle Ages, especially during the Crusade Wars and along the Arabs expansion in Europe until the very days of the Third Millennium, the West promotes almost the same stereotypes for Arabs and Muslims. Whether the contact took place in the foregone centuries or it happens recently, the West preserve a persisting conceptualization of the Arabs and Muslims as an alien "Other" or rather "Enemy." (Redouani 1)

Edward Said once noted that the West promotes a deep-rooted hatred for Islam, his critique of Western perceptions of the East**,** especially as explored in his influential book *Orientalism* (1978), which it refers as a term to the study, representation, and portrayal of the East (the "Orient") by the West. Orientalism, as an academic discipline, was also a Western style of thought, "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Wright 428). Said argued that:

> this discourse has been shaped by colonialism and imperialism, with the West casting itself as rational, civilized, and superior, while portraying the East as exotic, backward, and barbaric. He pointed that Western culture and scholarship have historically constructed this distorted and prejudiced image, particularly the Arab and Muslim

> world, and has influenced various disciplines, including literature, art, and translation, and more. (Said 1)

Said's analysis of the Orientalist discourse has been drawn on various academic and non-academic sources. His theory has influenced many scholars who have continued to probe and form theories examining the Orientalist phenomenon. In fact said was "a part of a more critical conjuncture in the 1980s that was facilitated by theoretical developments in post-structuralism, neo-Marxism, and deconstructionism and feminism, where the Enlightenment topic of subject-formation prevailed" (Bhatnagar 3).

As he argues about the misrepresentation of Islam by the Westerners, Said emphasizes a deeper issue: whether it is ever truly possible to represent anything accurately. He suggests that all representations are inherently shaped by the language, culture, institutions, and political context of the one doing the representing. He stresses that if this view is correct as he believes then we must recognize that every representation is, by its nature, entangled with numerous influences beyond just the supposed "truth", which itself is merely another form of representation. (Said 272).

As a discourse, Orientalism functions as an example of the postcolonial predicament of both Asians and Westerners. In the works of western scholars, the west has whether implicitly or explicitly appeared superior over the rest of the world. In order to make the occident appear superior and possible, such scholars "produced a discourse that evolved into a kind of imaginary binary ontology" (Juhki 12). Unfortunately, this binary ontology is surprisingly still strong today in spite of all the reasons that might make the two parts less distinguishable. (Hamed and Mehiri 564).

In his book, Said draws a picture on the colonial discourse and its implications. Orientalism shows how the colonial hegemony is implied within texts and discourses. In *Shifting Perspectives of Postcolonialism in Twenty-First Century Anglophone Arab Fiction* (2022),

Majed Alenezi explains that postcolonial discourse mainly seeks to challenge and correct the images and narratives imposed by colonial powers. He emphasizes that colonial and postcolonial discourses are fundamentally opposed to each other. Colonial writers, benefiting from their dominant position, constructed specific portrayals of colonized peoples that were meant for Western audiences. These portrayals shaped how non-European societies were perceived, often presenting them as inferior or uncivilized. (Alenezi 1)

Colonialism, according to Alenezi, was not just a political project but one with deep, lasting effects on the identities and worldviews of the colonized. It promoted the idea that Western culture was superior in every way socially, culturally, economically, and politically leading to misconceptions and a weakened sense of self among colonized individuals. This contributed to a psychological legacy of subordination to the West, embedding a persistent ideology of inferiority in the colonized mind. (2)

In her book *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* (1994), an account of Western travel writing in the Near and Middle East, Rana Kabbani, a Muslim feminist, journalist and student of English and Arabic literature, educated in America and England, finds wholly in favor of Said's thesis: that there exists a predetermined discourse regarding the Orient; that Western travel writers, inescapably subservient to that discourse, were deeply implicated in the imperialist project; and that Western culture was itself to some extent shaped by distorted representations of the East (the Orient, the other, the opposite, the enemy, the foil). European travel writers created a series of self-confirming stereotypical images of the East, as alien, timeless, jealous, irrational, cruel, lethargic and lascivious, it was designed to codify, comprehend and ultimately rule over the Orient. (Marandi and Shabanirad 23-24)

Orientals, as Said mentioned, "were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined" (Said 207). The Discourse of Orientalism was a creation of the imperial culture or what is called cultural

hegemony, and it is strongly related to history of imperialism. Later on, it penetrated literature to become what is known today as literature discourse. This same discourse has been used for centuries as a powerful tool to establish imperialism, by depicting Oriental people as silent and subaltern other to speak for them. In short, Orientalism is a Western ideology for having authority over the Orient. (Hamed and Mehiri 558)

In essence, Said's conclusion in *Orientalism (1978),* is a call for the decolonization of knowledge, the recognition of the power dynamics inherent in representation, and the empowerment of the colonized to redefine their own identities outside of Western-imposed narratives. His work remains a foundational text in postcolonial studies, urging scholars and activists alike to critically engage with the way knowledge is produced and how power shapes our understanding of different cultures.

1.3. The Misrepresentation of Arab and Muslim Women in Western Discourse

Ever since the beginning of human existence, patriarchal order has had a great impact on almost everything in the world. Patriarchy is also a part of colonization. Colonization is itself a masculine phenomenon in which the male colonizers victimize native women. The construction of native women in terms of recognizable roles, images, models, and labels occurs in Oriental discourse. The terms of such construction are to be sought in the dominant modes of ideology (patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism). What is required here is an alertness to the political process by which such representation becomes naturalized. (Marandi and Shabanirad 24)

Postcolonial studies increasingly emphasize gender roles, especially when dealing with the impact of the colonial process on the women. That women in the colonized society suffer from exploitation by both colonized and indigenous power structure is well understood. For example, in his definitive study of colonialism Postcolonialism Robert Young points out the double exploitation of women by the patriarchal structures of both colonial power and

colonized indigenous societies “patriarchal systems of exploitation were common to both colonial regimes and indigenous societies. Women therefore had to fight the double colonization of patriarchal domination in its local as well as its imperial forms.” (Young 379).

The Western perceptions of Muslim Arab women have long been shaped by orientalist and colonial discourses that depict them as passive, oppressed, and in need of liberation. This reductive image, often symbolized by the veil, fails to account for the diversity and agency of Muslim women themselves. Said, in *Orientalism* (1978), revealed how The West portrayed the East as both fascinating and backward, and often viewing Muslim women either as objects of desire or as helpless victims. Within this framework, colonized Muslim women were frequently depicted as victims of patriarchal traditions, and that they are in need of rescue by the supposedly enlightened and civilized West. (Kersani and Hamza Reguig Mouro 2)

In Kabbani’s view, the representations of women, constructed by writers like Burton, reflected a standard Victorian prejudice, namely that all women were inferior to men; and that oriental women were doubly inferior, being both women and orientals. Women, that is to say, were part of the goods of empire, the living rewards available to men. They were there to be used sexually, and if it could be suggested that they were inherently licentious, then they could be exploited without misgiving. Orientalism makes assumptions about gender. Similarly, popular gendered stereotypes circulated such as the sexually promiscuous exotic Oriental female. The exoticized Oriental female, often depicted nude or partially-clothed in hundreds of Western works of art during the colonial period, was presented as an immodest, active creature of sexual pleasure who held the key to a myriad of mysterious erotic delights. (Marandi and Shabanirad 24).

In *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (1998), Meyda Yegenoglu points out that, “… when Said discusses the ways in which the Oriental woman is represented in Flaubert's works, he alludes to the uniform association established between

the Orient and sex". (Yegenoglu 25) Said notes, that when Gustave Flaubert a French novelist slept with an Egyptian courtesan, Kuchuk Hanem, he wrote to Louise Colet a French poet and writer that "the oriental woman is no more than a machine; she makes no distinction between one man and another man". (Said 187) In so doing, and in his subsequent novels, he "produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman". (Said 6) But within this influential narrative, "she never spoke of herself, never represented her emotions, presence or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was typically Oriental ". (Said 6) One can only imagine how different Kuchuk Hanem's own account might have been. Flaubert's position of power over her reflects the broader dynamic of dominance between the West and the East, a relationship that shaped and sustained the discourse surrounding the Orient. Said's work has been immensely important and has given rise to a wealth of studies of how colonial discourse constructs the Other. (Marandi and Shabanirad 24).

In her influential essay Can the Subaltern Speak? (1988), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak one of the most important postcolonial literary critics, critiques the ways in which Western intellectuals and colonial powers have historically silenced marginalized voices, particularly those of women in colonized societies. (Spivak 313). The term subaltern, which Spivak adopts and expands upon, refers to groups of people who are socially, politically, and geographically outside of dominant power structures, those who are marginalized, silenced, or excluded from mainstream society and discourse, as it was initially used by the Italian Marxist political activist Antonio Gramsci in his widely known book *"Prison Notebooks"*. (Gramsci 219)

Mira Hafsi a researcher in Mohamed Lamine Debaghine University Setif -2, in a Literary

study about Displacement and Identity in Ahdaf Soueif's Sandpiper and Melody (2017), mentioned that Spivak argues that subaltern women, those at the lowest levels of social and political power are doubly oppressed: first by local patriarchal structures, and second by imperialist and academic discourses that claim to speak on their behalf. She famously captures this mindset and attitude with the phrase "white men saving brown women from brown men," exposing how colonial discourse frequently framed colonized women as powerless and in need of salvation by the West. As well as the patronizing attitude of both colonial rulers and some Western feminists, who often treat women in non-Western societies as voiceless victims, needing to be saved from gendered oppression by outsiders. (Hafsi 98).

Spivak also argues that the subaltern cannot speak for him/herself, because colonialism will never give them the chance to speak. And women in particular, since as it is mentioned before, they are victims of double discrimination: being colonized subjects, and being victims of a patriarchal society. Bertens elaborates on this concept by saying: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern had no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as a female is even more deeply in the shadow" (Bertens 212). Women, in a subaltern society, cannot fully represent them, even if they try.

Spivak gives an example of how the subaltern female is silenced in a colonial society, with the Sati tradition. The Sati means the good wife, and that ritual was one of the oldest traditions in the Hindu culture. According to this tradition, the widow of the deceased should be burned alive on the same pyre of her dead husband. This action of self-sacrifice is supposed to purify her and her husband from their evil deeds. Additionally, it will help them in their afterlife. (Shamsudin 45). The British colonial power banned this tradition by the power of law in 1828. The British occupation viewed the Sati tradition as an act of barbarism and atrocity against women. Hence fore, it was "the white man's duty to save the savage and barbaric brown man from destroying himself and his society" (Spivak 68).

On the other hand, the nationalists, the people opposing the British occupation, viewed the banning of the Sati as an act of colonial hegemony. The nationalist believed that the British were trying to impose their own customs and traditions on the Indians. And that this ban was an attempt to erase the Indian identity. So, the nationalists encouraged the performance of the Sati tradition for so many years after the ban. All this conflict and struggle between the nationalist and the British occupation occurred without even thinking of asking women in their opinion in performing the Sati tradition. (Hamza 184)

Building on the example provided by Spivak, it also perfectly applies to how the Arab Muslim women voices are denied and forbidden from expressing their perspectives regarding the claims propagated by colonial discourse. Their opinions are often silenced or overshadowed, with others speaking on their behalf, reinforcing the marginalization and misrepresentation imposed by both colonial and patriarchal structures.

This rhetorical move not only justified colonial domination but also erased the agency, voice, and subjectivity of the women themselves. Spivak's work stresses this case to the Western to reconsider how they engage with the voices of those they seek to represent, urging them to create space for genuine self-representation rather than imposing their own frameworks and perceptions. And warns against the simplified portrayal of Muslim or colonized women as helpless, and criticizes the Western feminist impulse to "rescue" them without understanding their historical, cultural, or personal realities. (Thompson 143)

1.4. Cultural Translation as Mediation: Refuting Misrepresentation through Arab-Islamic Anglophone Literature

By engaging in narrative resistance, Arab Muslim Anglophone writers and translators in English have provided alternative perspectives that counter Western stereotypes, humanize Arab identities, reclaim historical and cultural narratives, and offering nuanced, insider perspectives. Through literature and translation, they confront reductive images of Muslims as

either terrorists or oppressed subjects, instead portraying Islam as a lived, complex, and spiritually rich tradition. (Kersani and Hamza Reguig Mouro)

One prominent example is, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992). By Ahdaf Soueif, a contemporary Egyptian-British novelist and cultural theorist, Soueif constructs a richly layered narrative that challenges Western misrepresentations of Islam through the lens of cultural hybridity, a concept central to Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory. Bhabha's notion of hybridity refers to the "third space" in which cultural identity is not fixed or oppositional, but negotiated, fluid, and dynamic. This space allows individuals to resist dominant binaries, such as East versus West or Islam versus modernity, and instead form identities that are nuanced and evolving. For Bhabha, hybridity is a resistance to essentialism**,** it is the site of negotiation where individuals and communities can redefine and reconstitute themselves in the face of cultural encounters. Soueif presents hybrid identities shaped by both Arab and Western influences. The characters in her novels are not purely Arab or purely Western, they embody influences from both cultures. (Umar and Lawan 16)

Through the character of Asya, a Muslim Egyptian woman who lives between Cairo and London, Soueif dramatizes the tensions and contradictions of hybrid existence. Asya embodies a culturally hybrid subject who navigates Islamic values, gender expectations, and Western secularism without fully assimilating into any singular ideology. Rather than presenting Islam as monolithic or static, Soueif uses Asya's internal conflict and intellectual growth to show how Islamic identity can coexist with modern, feminist, and cosmopolitan experiences. In this way, the novel subverts Orientalist narratives that depict Islam as inherently oppressive or incompatible with modernity. Bhabha's theory underscores how this in-between space becomes a site of resistance, where cultural translation and reinterpretation undermine the authority of colonial discourse. (Soueif)

These characters may have studied or lived in the West, but they still carry a cultural or religious Arab background. Which creates a form of mixed or hybrid identity, one that doesn't fully belong to either side but exists between both. Soueif shows in her writing that these characters often experience tension or inner conflict between Western and Arab values or customs. However, she does not portray this conflict as inherently negative. Instead, she uses it to demonstrate that identity is not something fixed or rigid, but it is flexible and can evolve through different life experiences. Her portrayal of Islam through a hybrid lens not only refutes Western mischaracterizations but also affirms the agency of Muslim women to define their faith and identity on their own terms. (Hafsi 96)

Julanda Guardi, a researcher in Macerata University of Italy, expressed in a research paper titled as "Iam My Language" Arabic Language in English Writing in Ahdaf Soueif's Work, that Soueif employs what is known as code-switching, which means according to *Cambridge Dictionary*, the act of changing between two or more languages, dialects, or accents. As in here switching between English and Arabic within the same text. For example, she may write a sentence in English but include an Arabic word or phrase. This technique gives the writing a realistic tone because it reflects how people in real life speak, especially those who live between two cultures. And through this technique, Soueif Challenges the dominance of English, which is often seen as the language of power and knowledge in global literature, and gives Arabic a visible and valuable presence within texts that are usually consumed by a Western audience. (Guardi 43)

In doing so, Soueif positions Literature as a powerful medium for asserting hybridity and resisting cultural erasure. Her work implicitly communicates that identity is not confined to binary categories of East or West, but rather is a complex, layered fusion, and that Arab voices need not conform to Western expectations in order to be heard or understood. (Hafsi 96-97)

In *Him, Me, and Muhammad Ali (2016)*, a collection of short stories, by Randa Jarrar an American-Palestinian writer and translator, the titular story *"Him, Me, and Muhammad Ali"* explores the protagonist's admiration for Muhammad Ali, a figure who symbolizes both Islamic pride and American celebrity. Ali's image in Western media has been complicated**,** he is both a hero and a political figure, celebrated for his athleticism and resistance to societal pressures, yet often reduced to a mere Muslim identity in a way that erases his individuality and agency. The protagonist, much like many individuals from hybrid backgrounds, finds herself at the intersection of Islamic heritage and American individualism, struggling to reconcile these two forces. (Fitria 58)

Jarrar uses Ali's story to explore the hybridity of identity, particularly as it relates to Muslim masculinity. Ali, often portrayed by Western media as a symbol of Islamic pride and anti-colonial resistance, is used in the story to critique the way Muslim figures are often reduced to symbolic representations that ignore their complexity. The protagonist's admiration for Ali demonstrates how even Islamic identity can be appropriated and misrepresented by the West, and how Muslims, like Ali, navigate a hybrid space where their identities are shaped by both Islamic and Western influences**.** (Rahmadania 61)

In one striking passage, Jarrar writes, "Ali's boxing was never just a sport, it was a method of survival. He made space for us, Muslims in a world that wanted to define us only by the actions of a few" (Jarrar 51). This line resonates with the protagonist's struggle to define herself outside the confines of the Western gaze**,** just as Ali did in his boxing career. Here, Jarrar uses Ali's legacy as a metaphor for the hybrid nature of Muslim identity in the West, one that is shaped by both resistance to and integration into Western culture. The protagonist's internal conflict reflects the broader tension between the desire to embrace both Islamic and Western identities without surrendering one to the other. Through her use of Bhabha's concept of hybridity, she shows that identity is a dynamic, negotiated space where

individuals can redefine themselves, assert their agency, and challenge the stereotypes imposed upon them. In doing so, she contributes to a broader effort to reclaim and redefine what it means to be a Muslim and an Arab in a globalized world. (Fitria et al. 61)

In her work *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), Mohja Kahf a Syrian-American poet, novelist, and professor, offers a profound example of how Arab Muslim Anglophone writers use literature and cultural translation to mediate between Islamic identity and Western misrepresentations. Set in 1970s and 1980s Indiana, the novel follows Khadra Shamy, a Syrian-American Muslim girl, as she grows up negotiating the often-conflicting demands of her Arab-Muslim upbringing and American society. Through Khadra's journey, Kahf illustrates Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity and the creation of a Third Space where identities are not fixed but constantly negotiated. Rather than portraying Muslim women through the stereotypical Western lens of victimhood and passivity, Kahf constructs complex, autonomous Muslim female characters who embody resistance, faith, and self-determination. (Arami 43)

Kahf employs cultural translation by writing in English but weaving into her narrative Arabic phrases, Islamic references, and detailed depictions of Muslim communal life, thereby making an insider's world accessible without exoticizing it. This strategy challenges the Western tendency to essentialize Islam and Muslim women. As Khadra reflects, "Islam wasn’t a monolith. It wasn’t a single ‘thing’ you could either accept or reject wholesale. It was lived, contested, interpreted differently by everyone who claimed it" (Kahf 307). By foregrounding the internal diversity of Islamic practice, Kahf dismantles the notion of a singular, oppressive Islam portrayed in Western discourse. In this way, Kahf’s work echoes Edward Said’s argument in *Orientalism* (1978) that the West constructs a distorted, static image of Islam in order to maintain cultural superiority. Like Said, Kahf reveals how literary narratives can counter these hegemonic representations by showing Muslims as dynamic, self-

interpreting subjects rather than fixed stereotypes. Kahf thus questions the view which holds identity to be fixed and ossified, and problematizes the prevalent stereotypes of gender, nationality, and religion. She portrays the self as threshold, a zone in between two multiplicities, but also a zone of proximity where the elements of multiplicities come into contact, and pass through and between each other (Deleuze and Guattari 249).

Moreover, Kahf's narrative asserts that faith and freedom are not mutually exclusive, as Khadra realizes after a long process of self-exploration: "I don't have to choose between being Muslim and being free" (Kahf 365). Here, Kahf directly refutes the dominant Western assumption that liberation for Muslim women necessitates the abandonment of their religious and cultural identities. Instead, Khadra's story shows that a Muslim woman can be both faithful and autonomous, a realization that embodies hybrid identity formation. This reclamation of voice and agency connects to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question in Can the Subaltern Speak? (1988), as Kahf's portrayal of Khadra offers a clear instance where a Muslim woman speaks for herself rather than being spoken for by Western discourses. Kahf's work thus participates in the broader postcolonial project of recovering subaltern voices and challenging the mechanisms of silencing inherent in colonial narratives. (Armani 43-53)

The novel also encapsulates Bhabha's idea of the Third Space, where cultural negotiation creates new forms of identity beyond binary oppositions. As Khadra states, "I'm not from here or there. I'm from a third place" (Kahf 378), emphasizing her refusal to fully assimilate into either American secular culture or an idealized, rigid form of traditional Islam. Through this articulation, Kahf illustrates how hybrid identities are sites of resistance and creativity, destabilizing Western essentialist representations of Muslims. She undergoes "unhomeliness" as delineated by Homi K. Bhabha: "The negating activity is, indeed, the intervention of the "beyond" that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where "presencing" begins because it captures

something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world (the unhomeliness) that is the condition of extraterritorial and cross-cultural initiations. To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the “unhomely” be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres.” (Bhabha 13)

1.5. The Intersection Between Culture and Literature in Postcolonial Arab Muslim Novels

In postcolonial Arab Muslim literature, the intersection between culture and literature signifies the dynamic exchange where literary texts not only reflect cultural values but actively shape and redefine them. The term "intersection" refers to the overlapping and mutual influence of two or more fields, in this case, how culture informs literary production, and how literature reinterprets cultural norms. Postcolonial Arab Muslim novels offer fertile ground for exploring this intersection, as they grapple with the consequences of colonialism, cultural displacement, religious heritage, and social transformation. These narratives function both as repositories of cultural memory and as arenas for contesting identity, language, gender roles, and religious perceptions. By examining language, identity, hybridity, gender and feminism, and religion, we can better understand how postcolonial Arab Muslim writers challenge dominant narratives and reconstruct their realities through literature (Ben dris et al.)

In the Postcolonial Arab Anglophone novel, language, identity, and hybridity intersect in complex and transformative ways, reflecting the lived experiences of Arab writers and their characters. Language serves both as a bridge and a barrier; while English offers global reach, it carries colonial legacies that writers resist by infusing their narratives with Arabic idioms, cultural references, and structural nuances. This linguistic hybridity mirrors the protagonists' struggles with identity, as they grapple with displacement, exile, and cultural duality, existing between Arab heritage and Western influence. Identity in these narratives is presented as fluid and evolving, shaped by colonial histories, migration, and the tensions between tradition and

modernity. Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" becomes crucial here, portraying characters who inhabit an interstitial zone where cultural boundaries blur and hybrid forms of selfhood emerge (Bhabha 36). Through this engagement with language and identity, these novels subvert rigid binaries of East and West, offering complex and evolving portraits of Arab identity in an increasingly globalized world. (Bahr)

The negotiation of identity further extends into the realms of gender and feminism, which, although interconnected, are treated distinctly within postcolonial Arab Muslim narratives. Gender refers broadly to the social and cultural constructions of roles assigned to men and women, while feminism in this context specifically addresses the critique of gendered power structures and the advocacy for women's agency and rights. (Tsolidis 267). Postcolonial Arab Anglophone writers complicate both: they resist internal patriarchal norms while simultaneously challenging Western feminist assumptions that often depict Muslim women as universally oppressed. Writers such as Leila Aboulela in *Minaret* and Hanan al-Shaykh in *The Story of Zahra* present female protagonists who claim agency not by rejecting their cultural or religious roots but by reinterpreting them on their own terms. These portrayals critique both the local and global systems that attempt to define Arab Muslim women from the outside. (Mehdid 224)

Religion, particularly Islam, emerges alongside these discussions as a foundational yet dynamic force in shaping identity. Postcolonial Arab Muslim novels reject monolithic and Orientalist portrayals of Islam, instead illustrating faith as a deeply personal and evolving experience. Rather than being an obstacle to modernity or feminism, Islam is often portrayed as a source of ethical strength, spiritual grounding, and resistance to both colonial and neo-imperial narratives. Characters like Khadra in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* demonstrate how religious identity can coexist with feminist aspirations and cultural hybridity. In doing so, these novels offer a powerful corrective to Western misrepresentations, showcasing a lived

Islam that is multifaceted, empowering, and inherently intertwined with the broader postcolonial struggle for voice and authenticity. (Rahmadania 62)

1.6. Conclusion

This chapter has traced the ways in which Islam and Muslim women have been misrepresented within Western discourse, shaped by longstanding colonial attitudes and orientalist frameworks. Drawing on Edward Said's orientalism and Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern, it becomes evident that these representations often silence, simplify, or distort the realities of Muslim identities. However, postcolonial Arab Muslim anglophone literature offers a powerful response, using the tools of storytelling and cultural translation to challenge these misconceptions. Through narratives that embrace Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and cultural complexity, writers reframe the conversation, positioning literature as a space where cultures meet, negotiate, and reimagine one another. In doing so, they not only resist imposed narratives but also affirm the richness of Muslim experience beyond Western constructs. This intersection of literature and culture, as explored in this chapter, paves the way for a deeper understanding of the transformative power of narrative, a theme that will continue to unfold in the following chapters.

Chapter Two

Building Cross-Cultural Bridges Through Hybridity in *The Translator*

2.Introduction

Culture is a deeply intricate and multifaceted phenomenon that requires ongoing reflection and self-awareness to truly comprehend. It permeates all aspects of human expression; language, literature, the arts, and both verbal and non-verbal behavior, revealing the values and beliefs of a society. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, understanding diverse cultures has become essential. In the past, isolated communities had limited need for cross-cultural interaction, but today's globalized environment demands communication across cultural boundaries for purposes such as work, trade, and travel. What is considered appropriate or meaningful in one culture may differ greatly in another. Literature, closely tied to its cultural origins, serves not only as a reflection of cultural identity but also as a powerful tool for fostering intercultural understanding. Through literature, individuals can develop the skills and insights necessary to engage effectively with unfamiliar cultures, making it an invaluable medium for expressing social and human values. (Mufuaya et al. 2–3)

Culture and literature are deeply intertwined, each shaping and reflecting the other. Literature often serves as a powerful medium through which cultural values, identities, and social norms are expressed, preserved, and contested. It provides a space where individuals and communities can narrate their experiences, articulate their beliefs, and negotiate their positions within larger socio-political and historical contexts. In postcolonial and cross-cultural settings, literature becomes especially significant as it bridges gaps between worlds, enabling dialogue across cultural boundaries. (Akhter 2)

This chapter explores how these intersections between culture and literature are manifested in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*, an Arab Muslim Anglophone novel that reflects the complexities of living between cultures. And critically examines how it mobilizes the concepts of hybridity, language, religion, and cultural identity not simply as narrative motifs, but as strategic instruments through which Leila Aboulela interrogates and subverts prevailing

orientalist and patriarchal discourses surrounding Islam and Muslim women. By embedding these intersecting elements into the personal journey of Sammar, the protagonist, Aboulela constructs a counter-narrative that destabilizes reductive stereotypes and offers a more nuanced and authentic representation of Muslim women's subjectivity in the diaspora. In doing so, the novel articulates a space for marginalized voices, asserting agency and complexity within transnational and cross-cultural literary frameworks.

2.2. Overview of *The Translator*

Aboulela's first novel, *The Translator* (1999), was long-listed for the IMPAC and Orange Prizes, and concerns a love affair between the eponymous Sudanese translator, Sammar, and the Scottish lecturer in Postcolonial Politics, Rae Isles, for whom she works. Recently widowed, Sammar lives a modest and lonely existence in her rented room in Aberdeen until she forges a closer friendship with Rae over the telephone one Christmas holiday. However, the stumbling block in their relationship is that Rae is not a Muslim and, after an argument about his lack of faith, Sammar returns to her family in Sudan. Months later, Rae pursues her there, having said the shahadah (declaration of faith) and converted to Islam. The novel ends happily, with Rae and Sammar planning to marry and travel to Egypt then back to Aberdeen. (Chambers 88)

This novel is all about translation: not just the literal linguistic translation that Sammar is involved in, from Arabic into English, but also cultural translation. Sammar's view of her translation work is that she is involved in "moulding Arabic into English, trying to be transparent like a pane of glass not obscuring the meaning of any word" (167).

After spending much of her early life in Khartoum, Sudan, Leila Aboulela relocated to Britain in 1987 to pursue her studies at the London School of Economics. Later, she settled in Aberdeen with her husband, where she worked as a Statistics tutor at the University of Aberdeen. It was during this period that she found the inspiration to write *The Translator*.

According to Aboulela, the harsh Scottish winters, her feelings of homesickness, and the rise of Islamophobic narratives in Western media during the First Gulf War were key factors that motivated her to craft this semi-autobiographical novel. (Fernandez 34)

2.3. Hybridity and the Crisis of Belonging in *The Translator*

Sammar inhabits in what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space», a space of hybridity where identity is not fixed but constantly shaped and redefined. (Bhabha 37) Her identity is influenced by both her Sudanese Islamic roots and the Western, secular world of Aberdeen. However, she doesn't feel fully at home in either culture. She misses the warmth and comfort of Sudan, yet she also tries to adapt to the cold and unfamiliar life in Scotland. Her sense of who she is becomes closely tied to her feelings about place. The way she longs for Sudan while feeling stuck in Aberdeen shows the emotional complexity of living between cultures. (Hedroug 715-716) Sammar's homesickness is strongly expressed through her sensory memories, for instance, when she reminisces: "She thought of going home, seeing home again, its colours again and in spite of years of yearning, all she had now was reluctance and some fear." (Aboulela 87)

Sammar lives in Aberdeen disconnected from her setting, with no sense of who she is or what she wants. The first lines of the novel start with a description of Sammar's dream, which indicate the state of the protagonist's hybrid identity:

> She dreamt that it rained and she could not go out to meet him as planned… She was afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this country, afraid of the wind even. At such times she would stay indoors and watch people doing what she couldn't do. (Aboulela 3).

In Aberdeen the heroine excludes herself from the public. She only knows the people that she works with like Rae and Yasmine and people in her own building. Sammar's room in Aberdeen is like a hospital room, as she does not personalize it to make it home. She tried to

erase all traces of her past with Tarig her deceased husband, holding onto only what was essential for one person. Sammar threw away everything else, keeping just a few basic items:

> One plate, one spoon, a tin opener, two saucepans, a kettle, a mug. She didn't care, didn't mind. Four years ill in a hospital she had made for herself. Ill, diseased with passivity, time in which she sat doing nothing. The whirlpool of grief sucking time. Hours flitting away like minutes. (Aboulela 16).

This shows that Sammar does not feel that Aberdeen is her home instead it is the place where she escapes from reality, and experiencing it as a geographical and emotional exile. As for nothing matters to her after her husband's death. (Boughrara 23) Wail Hassan a professor of Comparative Literature and English in his article entitled Leila Aboulela and the ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction 2008, describes her life as being "characterized by confinement-within her cold, drab room where she is often trapped by the weather, within her lonely existence that she drowns in sleep; and within memories of the past and dreams for an uncertain future." (Hassan 47) Aberdeen is dark in winter which makes Sammar more depressed.

Sammar deeply desires a sense of belonging and often imagines what life would be like if she had been born in Sudan. To her, Sudan represents home, identity, and emotional security, an idealized place she strongly defends. It holds a special place in her heart, while Aberdeen stands as a symbol of foreignness and isolation. As Aboulela writes, "In better times she used to reinvent the beginning of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan, Africa's largest land, in the Sister's Maternity Hospital, delivered by a nun dressed in white" (Aboulela 5). This imagined narrative reveals her deep sense of loss and contributes to her emotional exile, not only in Aberdeen but also in Sudan. Although she is Sudanese, her birth and upbringing outside of Sudan create a feeling of estrangement from her native land as well. (Al-Asmakh 17–18)

Sammar's hybrid identity is poignantly illustrated through her memories of Sudan that persist even as she navigates life in Aberdeen. Her emotional and sensory recollections of Khartoum, "the heat... the smell of dust after rain, the call to prayer echoing across the rooftops" reveal a deep cultural and spiritual attachment to her homeland (Aboulela 9). These moments of nostalgia reflect not just homesickness, but a dislocated sense of self, suspended between two worlds. While she is physically present in Scotland, her identity remains deeply entangled with the cultural rhythms of Sudan. This duality becomes more apparent in her reflections on social life: "In Khartoum, she would have visited a cousin, sat on a bed surrounded by chatter and children. Here in Aberdeen, there was only quiet and the hum of the fridge" (13). Such contrasts emphasize her isolation in the West and her emotional belonging in the East, capturing the fragmented reality of her hybrid existence. Furthermore, Sammar's internal act of self-translation, "She translated herself back into Arabic in her mind" highlights the constant negotiation between languages and cultures that defines her identity (22). These memories function not only as a link to her past but also as markers of her in-between state, embodying the internal tension and complexity of living between cultures. (Aladylah 479-480)

Sammar finds herself torn between the communal way of life she knew in Sudan and the more individualistic lifestyle she encounters in Aberdeen. While Sudan, her homeland, values collective identity and close-knit social ties, Scotland where she lives emphasizes personal independence and self-reliance. According to Jeff Laundauer's and Joseph Rowlands's:

> Collectivism is a form of anthropomorphism. It attempts to see a group of individuals as having a single identity similar to a person. ... Collectivism demands that the group be more important than the individual. It requires the individual to sacrifice himself for the alleged good of the group... The standard of good is that which benefits the

> group… if an individual refuses to acknowledge the superiority of his collective, then he is a traitor and is eliminated. (Launauer and Rowlands 52)

In collectivist cultures like Sudan, individuals are expected to consider how their actions might impact not just themselves but also their families and communities. This is the root of Sammar's fear, she worries her family will see her as disloyal if she ever takes her choices without their approval. In contrast, individualistic societies like Scotland prioritize personal freedom and independence. "Individualistic cultures are those that stress the needs of the individual over the needs of the group as a whole." (Cherry) However, Sammar keeps alternates between both positions causing her to favor the one that she misses. She idealizes each place when she is not in it. For example when Sammar is in Aberdeen she misses being in Sudan, and when she goes to Sudan, she keeps on comparing it to Aberdeen.

Sammar misses many collectivistic traits when she migrates to Scotland like eating as one big family with her aunt, brother, nieces, cousin and neighbors. Sammar also misses her typical life, " Housework, in the evening a social life, everyone indoors by the eleven o'clock curfew. Visitors or calling on people to offer condolences when death came, congratulations when a baby came. Welcome to the one who arrived from abroad, goodbye to the one who was going away." (Aboulela 157) On the other hand in Khartoum, the heroine misses the traits of an individualistic society like the privacy and the independency that she had in Aberdeen. In Khartoum, there is no privacy at all to the extent that the heroine searches for a private place at home just to read Rae's letter " Later that same day, she wondred where she could find privacy in the house." (Aboulela 189)

Sammar views her home country through a binary lens, often contrasting it with the structured environment of Aberdeen. While in Sudan, she points out to her son Amir and niece Dalia that in Scotland, they would have been required to sit in the back seat and wear seat belts "If we were in Scotland, you would have had to sit in the back and wear seat belts."

(Aboulela 145) Which is something unfamiliar to the children, who had never encountered such safety measures. In contrast, Aberdeen operates with clear rules and societal expectations that are widely respected. In another scene when Sammar visits her husband Tarig's grave in Sudan with her aunt, she is taken aback by the unkempt state of the cemetery, where litter like orange peels, cigarette packs, and bird nest remains have blown in through a barbed-wire fence. In contrast, cemeteries in Aberdeen are neat and orderly, with rows of white metal benches, each bearing a plaque commemorating someone who has passed, suggesting in Sammar's view, that even in death, people are expected to serve a purpose for the living, such as providing a place to sit in the Winter Gardens. (Aboulela 4-185)

Rae as well observes stark contrasts when he visits Sudan, beginning at the airport, where he notes that the conveyor belt is broken, causing a long delay in retrieving luggage. In the airport Rae says: "The conveyer belt wasn't working so it took ages for the luggage to come out.." (Aboulela 145) Meanwhile, Sammar remembers Aberdeen's airport as modern, clean, and comfortable. The differences continue when Rae checks into his hotel in Sudan, which has issues like the shower was not working and there were rats. Sammar felt a sense of embarrassment, since she has experienced life in both countries and being acutely aware of the disparities between them. (Aboulela 200)

However, rather than being torn apart by the clash of cultures, Sammar navigates her in-between space and hybrid identity with quiet resilience. Her survival is not about choosing one identity over the other, but about learning to live with both, bridging the distance between Sudan and Scotland. Through this, Sammar's journey becomes a powerful testament to the possibility of endurance and inner peace amid cultural hybridity. And instead of remaining fragmented by these opposing forces, Sammar gradually begins to inhabit a hybrid identity, wherein both aspects of her cultural experience coexist. She does not assimilate into Western norms, nor does she reject her current environment. (Laheg 62)

2.4. Female Otherness in *The Translator*

Arab Anglophone diaspora literature consists of writings by Arab authors who have experienced migration and the challenges of living in foreign societies. These writers were among the first to express the tensions of living between two cultures and the ongoing efforts to bridge their differences. Their stories often reflect the political and economic pressures that drive migration, the alienation felt in foreign lands, and the shifting perceptions they encounter when returning to their homelands. Common themes in their work include marginalization, racial discrimination, Otherness, and the emotional toll of displacement. Arab women writers in particular approach these issues through the lens of female Otherness, offering insight into how migration and identity intersect with women's experiences of being perceived as different or outside dominant norms (Mazouzi 293).

A significant portion of Arab Anglophone women's diaspora writing focuses on the theme of Otherness, especially how women are defined and restricted by social and cultural norms. These narratives not only reflect internal struggles and hierarchies within Arab societies but also respond to colonial portrayals of Arab nations as inferior or exotic Others. These orientalist views, grounded in ignorance and cultural misrepresentation, continue to shape perceptions of Arab women. Authors such as Diana Abu-Jaber, Ahdaf Soueif, and Leila Aboulela challenge such images in their work. In doing so, Arab women diaspora writers draw attention to the intersection of female identity and Otherness in their representation of women's roles and voices (Meyer 12).

In *The Translator*, Leila Aboulela places particular emphasis on the experience of being othered as an Arab Muslim woman, through the character of Sammar, across two cultural landscapes, Scotland and Sudan. The novel's first half presents Sammar as a cultural outsider in Scottish society, while the second half portrays her as Othered within her own Sudanese community, especially in the eyes of her relatives.

The theme of othering is central in the novel, as Sammar is marginalized not only due to her racial and cultural identity but also through the expectations placed upon her as a woman. Characters such as her aunt Mahasen, her brother Waleed, the family acquaintance Am Ahmad, and the male protagonist Rae Iles all contribute to her sense of being an outsider. These cultural norms of othering profoundly influence how Sammar sees herself in both societies.

In Scotland, her internalized sense of otherness manifests in a quiet, almost unconscious dependence on the presence of a man in her life. After losing her husband, Tarig, in a car accident, she drifts into a state where her dreams and sense of purpose become intertwined with the prospect of remarriage. When she begins to develop feelings for her boss, Rae, she quickly envisions a future with him and even asks him to convert to Islam, an act that reflects not only her religious values but also an unexamined need for male companionship. (Aboulela 125)

Without fully realizing it, she places her self-worth and emotional security in the hope of being chosen again, reinforcing a self-image shaped by societal and cultural norms that position women as incomplete without men. Her silent longing is further exposed through her envy of Rae's Palestinian friend, Fareed Khalifa. The narrator notes that she envies Fareed not just for his family life, but because his married status aligns with religious ideals, "... she envied Fareed because he was married and she was not, and marriage was half of their faith." (108) These thoughts reveal how deeply embedded cultural and religious expectations have shaped her worldview. Rather than actively choosing this path, she appears to be quietly navigating roles assigned to her, unaware of how her sense of otherness silences her agency and limits her understanding of herself outside of relational and patriarchal frameworks.

In this sense, the protagonist, chained by her grief, solitude, and exile, was portrayed envious of her neighbor Leslie as well:

> Lesley was always busy, she went out in every kind of weather to play Bingo. In the months when Sammar had hauled her pain up and down the stairs, she would admire Lesley, so many years older than herself and more full of life. Living alone and filling up with her own self the empty space of a flat, a garden, a niche in life. (Aboulela 36)

For four years, Sammar grappled with the difficulties of her life, admiring Lesley for the strength and confidence she showed in confronting the world. This admiration reveals Sammar's desire to live with the same independence and resilience. Despite being younger than her neighbor, she found herself unable to regain control over her life as she had before when Tarig was there. (Boughrara 26)

Out of a deep sense of Otherness and solitude, Sammar gradually forgets about herself and her identity as a woman. Isolated in a foreign culture and weighed down by grief, she becomes emotionally dependent on the presence of a man to feel complete. Her position as the female Other is portrayed in the novel through this quiet yet profound reliance. Without a man, Sammar perceives her life as empty; without male companionship, she is overtaken by loneliness. The narrator captures her inner state poignantly: "Inside Sammar there was froth like that, a froth that could rise if she started to speak. Then he (Rae) would see it and maybe go away, when all she wanted was for him to remove it so that she could be clear. It would be easy for him to make her clear, she thought, as easy as untying a ribbon." (7). This metaphor reflects her inability to confront her inner emotional turmoil and her belief that clarity and healing must come through a man. Her self-neglect further highlights this dependence. Following the death of her husband, Sammar withdraws from her identity, she stops caring for herself, lives in austerity, and does not buy new clothes. The narrator notes: "Since Tarig died she had not bought anything new. She had not noticed time moving past..." (67). However, once she meets Rae and her emotions for him begin to grow, she slowly reconnects with

herself. Her attention to her appearance returns, and with it, a sense of vitality and presence back in her life again. (Mazouzi 296)

Her status as the Arab Muslim female Other is also portrayed when she first returned to Sudan, through her aunt's attitudes as a woman brought up in a patriarchal society that, in its turn, puts the woman in the position of the silent Other and suppresses her acts and choices. When a friend of the family, Am Ahmed, who is much older than her and married to two wives, proposed to marry her. Her aunt describes him as "you want to get married again…and to whom? A semi-illiterate with two wives and children your age" (23). This proposal reflects a vision of otherness towards the widow Sammar. It is the vision of the weak widow who needs urgently the support of a man. Diana Tietjens Meyers, in her book *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency* 2001, states that patriarchal societies treat woman not only as a complete member of the society who is given an inferior position, but they consider women as inferior beings and they severely constrain women's choosing and acting. (Meyers 3)

This perspective is evident not only in Sammar's aunt's refusal to remarry, but also in her choice to return to Scotland with her son instead of remaining in Sudan, despite the loneliness she faces there. She firmly told her: "I'll never give permission for something like this (her marriage)" (23), and added: "You should go back to England, work there and send us things" (169). Her aunt also appears to view her with a sense of inferiority. widow Sammar. It is the vision of the weak widow who needs urgently the support of a man. Moreover, her brother, Waleed, told her from a patriarchal view that he is the only one left from their family, and he cannot receive her and Amir in his home (152). This confession is a confirmation of the vision of the Muslim patriarchal societies that consider the widow woman as a broken and helpless creature, who cannot care for herself and, therefore, must be under the care of her father or brother. He also appears to side with her aunt in making decisions on her behalf by

opposing her resignation (149), and once more, he cautions her that staying with her in-laws means that she does not want to get married again (152). This vision as the weak widow contributes to her categorization as the other within her community though she has nowhere to go.

Hence, both Sammar's brother and aunt contribute to positioning her as the silent Other by making decisions on her behalf, reflecting how, in many cultures, women's voices are often muted and their perspectives undervalued. This role of the silent Other applies to Sammar not only in Sudan but also in Scotland. In this context, the narrator depicts her as "she had to be silent. Use her teeth and lips to keep silent." (Aboulela 45). This depiction of the Arab Muslim woman as the silent other underscores Sammar's sense of hopelessness and lack of purpose in life. (Chin1)

2.5. Breaking Silence: The Subaltern Can Speak

In The Translator, the protagonist's hybrid identity, initially a source of marginalization, ultimately becomes a powerful tool for reclaiming her voice, alongside with her adherence to her religion. Navigating between Sudanese and Scottish cultures, she embodies a complex intersection of identities that allows her to challenge the silence imposed by both societies. Rather than being confined by the pressures of otherness, she embraces her hybridity as a form of resistance and empowerment. Through this personal journey, she reclaims agency not only for herself but symbolically for others who share her hybrid identity. Importantly, she serves as a cultural mediator, bridging two often polarized worlds, yet through this bridging role, she challenges monolithic cultural perceptions and opens space for more nuanced, empathetic understandings. (Zannoun 2)

This transformation echoes the critical idea that "the subaltern can speak," asserting that those traditionally marginalized or silenced possess the agency to articulate their own narratives. In Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) She explains that the

subaltern; people who are deeply marginalized by systems like colonialism, patriarchy, and social class, often do not have a real voice in society. Even when they try to speak, their words are often misunderstood, ignored, or replaced by those in power, especially within Western institutions and intellectual circles. Spivak's main point is that the subaltern *cannot truly speak,* not because they are mute, but because their voice is systematically filtered, distorted, or erased by hegemonic discourses. (Spivak 271–313)

However, *The Translator* subtly challenges this assertion. Aboulela's protagonist, a Muslim Sudanese woman in Scotland, is precisely the kind of subject Spivak identifies as a subaltern female, postcolonial, and religious. Yet, through the narrative, she actively reclaims her voice, and her journey is a vivid example of this, despite facing stereotypes and misunderstandings, she refuses to remain silent or invisible. For instance, when confronted with Western misconceptions of Muslim women as oppressed or voiceless, she insists on sharing her own voice, disrupting dominant narratives. As she reflects, "I am not the veiled figure of your imagination, but a woman with thoughts, desires, and voice" (Aboulela 74). Her dual cultural experience enables her to refute pervasive stereotypes about Muslim women dominating Western discourse. By asserting her narrative, she breaks through the silence surrounding Islam and its cultural practices, often misconstrued or exoticized. And through her spiritual beliefs, she draws resilience and a sense of justice that supports her in confronting both internal doubts and external prejudices. (Hiddleston 57–65)

Through this lens, Aboulela reclaims the possibility that the subaltern can speak**,** especially when the narrative framework is shaped by a writer who shares cultural and spiritual affinities with the subaltern subject. Therefore, while Spivak critiques the conditions that prevent the subaltern from being heard within Western discourse, Aboulela creates a literary space where that voice not only emerges, but also challenges and reshapes the discourse itself. The novel becomes an answer to Spivak's question, not denying the

difficulties, but insisting that the act of speaking back is still possible, powerful, and transformative.

Crucially, Islam stands behind her as a source of strength and dignity, offering a foundation for her empowerment as a woman. This empowerment is closely linked to Islamic feminism, which harmonizes faith and feminist principles to challenge patriarchal interpretations of religion. According to Alina Isac Alak a higher education teacher, and a researcher in the university of Vienna, in an article entitled, Contesting the Dichotomy of Islam and Modernity: Islamic Feminisms 2015, Islamic feminism represents the ideology which describes the discourse and the actions of those who protect women's rights within the context of an authentic or well understood Islam. (Alak18) Rather than rejecting religion as patriarchal, Islamic feminism reclaims sacred texts to affirm women's empowerment, challenging both internal misogynistic practices and the external imposition of Western feminist paradigms. Fatema Mernissi, a prominent Islamic feminist scholar, argues that this movement represents a fundamental shift in the feminist identity of Muslim women, rooting it in faith rather than secularism. (Mernissi1-3)

Leila Aboulela can be read as a leading voice in Islamic feminist literature. In *The Translator,* Aboulela offers a compelling reconfiguration of feminism through the lived experiences of a devout Muslim woman, Sammar, who negotiates her identity in a Western context. The novel subverts dominant Western feminist paradigms by centering a form of feminism rooted in Islamic faith, thereby presenting a cross-cultural feminist perspective that challenges stereotypes that frequently interpret Muslim women's religiosity and especially visible markers like the hijab, as symbols of submission or oppression. Aboulela constructs a narrative where faith is not antithetical to feminism but is instead a site of empowerment, resistance, and self-definition. (Majed 202–216)

> Once there was a time when she could do nothing. When she was held down by something heavy. Clogged up, dragging herself to pray, even her faith sluggish. Yet Allah had rewarded her even for these imperfect prayers. She had been protected from all the extremes. Pills, Break-down, attempts at suicide. A barrier was put between her and things like that, the balance that Rae admired. (Aboulela 118)

From the outset, Sammar's faith is portrayed as integral to her identity. Living in Aberdeen, she clings to her religious practices and beliefs, not out of submission but as a means of maintaining coherence in a world that often alienates her. For instance, she prays regularly, fasts during Ramadan, and dresses modestly, including wearing the hijab. "When she finished praying, she looked at the notices on the notice board: the prayer timetable, the dates of meetings of the inter-faith group, a talk about Jerusalem with a speaker coming up from St Andrews." (75) Sammar understands religion as a form of protection against the feelings of isolation and displacement so prevalent within diasporic communities, her life in Aberdeen filled with "days in which the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers... without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night" (16).

Her prayers and her faith that God was with her and had her back were her source of strength and the driving force that encouraged her to keep going, despite the harsh and emotionally exhausting life she was living alone in Aberdeen, yet God was her only refuge and sanctuary. "Her prayer mat had tassels on the edges, a velvety feel, a smell that she liked. The only stability in life, unreliable life, taking turns the mind could not imagine." (37) This line, underscores how amidst the chaos and unpredictability of her daily life in Aberdeen, the protagonist finds her sole sense of consistency in her religious rituals. It is through this intimate connection with her faith that the protagonist cultivates resilience, reclaiming a sense of control and inner peace. Her religious devotion is not merely a duty but a deeply personal

refuge that counters the emotional fragmentation brought on by migration and loneliness. (Fernandez37)

In Western feminist discourse, such choices as she is deeply connected to her religion and wears the hijab, are often misread as patriarchal impositions. However, Aboulela reclaims these actions as symbols of autonomy. Like when Sammar says, “My Islam was not just five prayers a day and fasting. It was a belief in the unseen, in angels, in destiny, in a purpose to life.” (45) she highlights the spiritual and existential dimensions of her faith. Her religious identity is a source of strength, not subjugation. Another poignant example of Sammar’s agency within her faith is her decision to end her relationship with Rae when she realizes he does not share her belief in God. Though she deeply loves him, she told him, “I can't marry you unless you are a Muslim. I can’t bring myself to do it” (132) This decision is not based on coercion or pressure from others, but stems from her internal moral compass. Feminist agency here is expressed through choice and conviction, even when that choice is emotionally painful. This act underlines Aboulela’s redefinition of female strength, not as rebellion against tradition, but as integrity and spiritual commitment. (Mosleh et al. 13-27)

The tension between Rae and Sammar also underscores the cultural and ideological divide between secular liberalism and Islamic values. Rae, a Scottish academic with a secular worldview, is fascinated by Islam from an intellectual perspective, but lacks the emotional and spiritual resonance that grounds Sammar’s beliefs. He once remarked that he can read the Qur’an and admire it, but he doesn’t believe it. (Aboulela 127) reflecting a distance that Sammar finds unsettling, and made her constantly confused, because clearly, she would not disobey the rules of her religion to fulfill her emotional desires. Which also reflects her personal decision, simply because she was capable of going against religious rules, but she chose not to, and was entirely her own choice to prioritize her faith. Which proves that it was not a form of pressure or coercion, but rather a decision she made as a Muslim woman and an

individual in the end. In contrast, Sammar's experiences in Sudan during her childhood and early adult years are deeply shaped by her personal connections to the place, most notably her romantic relationship with Tarig. This relationship challenges the Western stereotype that portrays Arab and Muslim women as passive victims of an inherently oppressive Islam. (Zannoun 2)

Thus, through *The Translator*, Aboulela constructs a distinctly Islamic feminist narrative, one that affirms that submission to God is not synonymous with submission to patriarchy. Sammar's strength lies in her integrity, her spiritual resilience, and her refusal to be defined by either Western secular expectations or reductive cultural stereotypes. Aboulela's work illustrates how Islam, far from being incompatible with feminism, can offer a powerful framework for female empowerment, moral clarity, and emotional fulfillment.

Ultimately, Aboulela creates a lens that seeks to clarify the picture of Arab/ Muslim women along with exploring the attitudes that influence this image. She crafts a very unique portrayal of Muslim women in the west who do not embrace Western culture; but rather her female characters seek solace in their firm religious identity to prove the centrality of women's rights in Islam. In portraying a powerful, independent, and moderate character for Arab women, she distinctively combines between the love of God and the love of man and at the same time presents an example of balance and moderation in how these women preserve their beliefs. Through using characters like Sammar, Yasmin, Mahasen and others she provides an inclusive analysis of the effect of labeling and normalization over the identity and independence of those women and concedes their Islamic feminist role in reshaping the Arab feminist identity and in overcoming the western imposed labels. (Al-Abed and Hamendi 29)

2.6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that in *The Translator*, the protagonist transforms her hybrid identity from a site of marginalization into a source of strength and self-expression. By

drawing on Islamic feminism and the belief that "the subaltern can speak," she effectively challenges stereotypes of Islam and Muslim women and asserts her voice across cultural boundaries. Significantly, Islam empowers her rather than silences her, enabling her to reclaim agency and act as a meaningful bridge between East and West. Through Sammar's journey, the novel becomes a site of cultural and literary intersection, where East meets West, tradition meets modernity, and personal belief resists homogenization. Ultimately, *The Translator* transcends mere narrative to become a powerful exploration of how hybridity, identity, and spirituality intersect to shape the experience of the diasporic Muslim woman in a globalized world.

Chapter Three

Translation a Means for Cultural Mediation: Bridging East and West in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

3. Introduction

Translation acts as a bridge between cultures, revealing the deep interconnections among various aspects of cultural expression. It is not simply the transfer of words from one language to another, but a complex process that carries cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews. Literature and translation often go hand in hand, with translation serving as a tool that not only conveys meaning but also exposes the nuances and challenges of interpreting across cultural boundaries. While translation can bring cultures closer, it can also highlight differences, occasionally reinforcing as much as filling the gap between the source and target cultures. This tension reflects the constant reshaping of boundaries between literary traditions. In today's multicultural world, global communication increasingly relies on dominant international languages, yet language remains more than a neutral medium, but it is a vehicle of identity and cultural heritage. As such, translation plays a crucial role in shaping cross-cultural relationships and literary systems. (Zerhouni 69)

This chapter will investigate how the act of translation in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* functions as a medium for cultural negotiation and transformation, far from being a purely linguistic exercise. And how translation emerges as a dynamic cultural act that enables the protagonist, Sammar, to navigate the ideological and emotional distances between the Islamic East and the secular West. Through her work as a translator, Sammar engages in a process of interpreting not only language but also cultural and religious meanings, allowing for the possibility of cross-cultural understanding, a space of encounter where identities are redefined and differences are mediated. Ultimately, leading to the symbolic and literal union between Sammar and Rae.

3.1. Translating Islam and Culture in *The Translator*

Based on established concepts in translation studies, Cultural translation refers to the process of conveying meaning across different cultures, not just through language but also by

adapting cultural contexts, traditions, and values. It goes beyond direct linguistic conversion, ensuring that the message remains relevant and understandable to the target audience. This type of translation is especially important in literature, media, advertising, and cross-cultural communication, where cultural differences can impact interpretation. (Sophie 3)

Cultural translation helps bridge gaps between societies by making texts, ideas, and expressions accessible while preserving their essence. In *The Location of Culture 1994*, Bhabha describes cultural translation as a process of negotiating meaning in postcolonial contexts. He sees it as an act of hybridity, where cultures interact and influence each other, challenging rigid notions of identity and authenticity. (Bhabha 85-115) Spivak, in the other hand in *The Politics of Translation* 1992, emphasizes the role of the translator as an ethical mediator. She warns against domestication, where cultural nuances are erased to fit the dominant language, and instead advocates for maintaining the cultural integrity of the source text. (Spivak 313)

These theoretical frameworks are deeply relevant to Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*, where translation functions not only as a professional task but also as a powerful metaphor for cultural mediation. Aboulela shows how language can be both a practical tool and a profound metaphor for cultural negotiation. For Sammar, the protagonist, working as an Arabic-English translator allows her to bridge two very different worlds, her Muslim Sudanese background and the Western, secular society she lives in. Sammar's profession as an Arabic-English translator places her in a literal position of mediation between cultures, the novel reveals the deeper emotional and spiritual tensions that come with linguistic and cultural translation. Arabic, her mother tongue, is closely tied to her identity, faith, and memory of home, while English represents both opportunity and alienation in her adopted Scottish environment, for example when she said "Yesterday when i spoke in Arabic to Fareed, I felt that home was close." (106), Aboulela uses language to illustrate the nuances of belonging and dislocation.

Sammar often feels that English cannot fully capture the depth of Islamic expressions or her emotional truths. (Steinitz 82-365)

> (…) she enjoyed talking in Arabic, words like insha' Allah, fitting naturally in everything that was said, part of the sentences, the vision. How many times had she over the past days said in English 'I'm leaving on Friday', and the sentence normal and natural as it was to the people who heard it, had sounded in her ears incomplete, untruthful without insha' Allah. (106).

For instance, the significance of Sammar's name. Early in her relationship with Rae, the meaning of her name becomes a moment of gentle clarification and cultural sharing:

> 'Do you pronounce it like the season, summer?' Rae asked the first time she had met him. 'Yes, but it does not have the same meaning.' And because he wanted to know more she said, 'It means conversations with friends, late at night. It's what the desert nomads liked to do, talk leisurely by the light of the moon, when it was no longer so hot and the day's work was over' (Aboulela 5)

In this brief exchange, Sammar attempts to translate not just a word, but a way of life, a cultural practice shaped by climate, community, and rhythm. The scene illustrates the novel's central concern with the complexities of cross-cultural understanding: it shows that while words can be translated, meanings often remain embedded in cultural contexts that resist full equivalence. (Spivak 93-110) This moment functions as a bridge between East and West, between Arabic and English, allowing Rae a glimpse into a different worldview.

In another scene, while speaking with Rae about Islam, Sammar explains that with every messenger sent, there was a miracle, but the Qur'an was the central and enduring one, "the miracle that Muhammad… was sent with" (Aboulela 124). By highlighting the Qur'an's divine origin, stressing its divine origin and unique power. Rae acknowledges this by conceding, "Translations don't do it justice. Much is lost…" to which Sammar responds, "Yes,

the meanings can be translated but not reproduced. And of course the miracle of it can't be reproduced…" (124).

This exchange follows her description of how early listeners were moved to tears by the Qur'an's sound, emphasizing that its impact transcends mere words. This moment illustrates that translating the Qur'an is not simply a linguistic act, but it requires a cultural and spiritual understanding that takes into account the context, faith, and emotional depth it carries. Rae's realization reflects the limitations of literal translation, while Sammar's insights highlight the embedded nature of meaning within cultural and religious frameworks. Hence, in this interaction, Sammar serves as a thoughtful and effective cultural mediator, helping Rae see beyond the text and into the worldview it reflects. Through her, the novel demonstrates that true cross-cultural understanding depends on more than language, it demands a form of cultural translation that bridges belief systems, emotional experiences, and lived realities. (Milostivaya et al. 182)

Nevertheless, through their conversations, Sammar uses language to bridge cultural and religious divides, highlighting the emotional and spiritual depth of the Qur'an that escapes English translation. Despite this limitation, her attempt to translate sacred texts reflects a sincere effort to clarify misconceptions and share the richness of her faith. Her position as a translator allows her to counter orientalist assumptions and correct Western misunderstandings about Islam, positioning language as a tool not only for connection but also for cultural education and resistance. In this way, Aboulela portrays language as a double force, practical and symbolic through which Sammar builds a life between cultures, reshaping perceptions and affirming her identity. (Kersani & Hamza Reguig-Mouro 165)

In a revealing dialogue, Aboulela illustrates how language again, serves as a bridge between Sammar and Rae, fostering connection through shared experiences;

> She looked up from a magazine article about schoolgirls in Somalia, and Rae

> was watching her, a look in his eyes like kindness. Encouraged, she said, 'I used to wear a uniform like that in secondary school.' 'They made us wear shorts even in the winter,' Rae replied, 'It was awful, walking to school in the cold' (Aboulela 17).

In this exchange, Sammar's reference to her school uniform evokes a memory that Rae can relate to, despite their differing cultural backgrounds. Their shared recollections of school attire become a medium through which they connect, highlighting how language and personal narratives can transcend cultural divides. This moment exemplifies how language acts as a bridge, enabling individuals from disparate cultures to find common ground through shared human experiences. It underscores the potential of language to foster empathy and understanding, also aligning with Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," where hybrid identities and meanings emerge through intercultural dialogue (Bhabha 37).

Moreover, one of the most significant moments of cultural and religious translation in *The Translator* occurs when Sammar explains the distinction between the Qur'an and the Hadith to Rae. She reads aloud from her notes:

> A sacred Hadith is, as to its meaning, from Allah the Almighty; as to the wording, it is from the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him. It is that which Allah the Almighty has communicated to His Prophet through revelation or in dream and he, peace be upon him, has communicated it in his own words. Thus the Qur'an is superior to it because, besides being revealed, it is Allah's wording. (Aboulela 36–37).

This passage is not only pedagogical but deeply symbolic of Sammar's broader role in the novel as a cultural mediator navigating the boundaries between Islamic knowledge and Western academic discourse. While Rae is positioned as an expert on Islam, his understanding remains largely intellectual and distanced. Sammar's explanation, by contrast,

is personal, reverent, and emotionally invested. This moment reveals a tension, that Rae may already know the factual distinction, but Sammar's voice imbues it with affective and devotional depth that cannot be conveyed by academic texts alone. (Steinitz 9-10)

Here, Aboulela disrupts conventional power dynamics often present in orientalist representations of Islam. As literary critic Waïl Hassan notes, Aboulela writes for readers; often Western who lack access to Islamic tradition in its original language, offering a narrative form of translation that is both informative and intimate (Hassan 310). In this light, Sammar's reading is not just for Rae, but for the novel's broader audience. It becomes a double act of translation: from Arabic to English, and from sacred tradition to secular modernity. Yet Sammar does not dilute or domesticate the hadith to suit Western frameworks. Instead, she preserves its theological structure, reverence, and epistemological context, an approach that echoes Spivak's insistence on ethical translation, where cultural and linguistic integrity must not be erased, as already mentioned before. (Spivak 313)

Through this scene, Aboulela begins to construct a model of translation that diverges from dominant Western paradigms. Translation here is not a tool of simplification or assimilation but an act of cultural respect and spiritual transmission. Sammar becomes a bridge between worlds not by collapsing difference, but by making space for understanding it. This early moment in the novel sets the stage for the larger arc of cross-cultural communication between Sammar and Rae, illustrating how sacred language, when translated with care and intentionality, can foster not only knowledge, but mutual transformation. In doing so, Aboulela asserts that translation, when rooted in humility and faithfulness to the source, is a powerful means of resistance, connection, and healing. (Brown 79-80)

3.2. The Translational Dynamics of Sammar and Rae's Cross-Cultural Relationship

Sammar's interaction with Rae, initially defined by her role as his Arabic translator, evolves into a profound cultural and emotional exchange. What begins as the simple mediation of

language becomes an act of sharing identity, faith, and worldview. Through her efforts to explain her Islamic concepts, such as the distinction between the Qur'an and Hadith, or the spiritual weight of words like iman (faith) and sabr (patience). (Aboulela 36-37) Sammar invites Rae into her inner world, one that is shaped by Sudanese culture, personal loss, and deeply held religious belief. As she tells Rae, "You talk about Islam as if it is a theory, an idea. But for me, it is life itself" (Aboulela 88). In this moment, Sammar is not just translating theology, but she is translating a lived experience. (Bell 1)

After Sammar and Rae began to develop a friendly, yet love relationship, it becomes increasingly shaped by the tensions and possibilities of cross-cultural translation. Sammar, grounded in her Islamic faith, attempts not only to translate Arabic into English professionally but also to translate the emotional and spiritual essence of Islam to Rae. Her efforts to share the richness of the Qur'an with him are marked by sincerity and vulnerability. For example, when she first found a translation of the Qudsi Hadiths: "She ran up the stairs that she had often taken a step at a time, dragging her grief. Now the staircase had a different aura, a different light" (41)

These intimate exchanges become the building blocks of a deeper connection. Rae, who initially approaches Islam from an academic, distanced perspective, begins to engage with it through Sammar's lens, one that is emotional, devotional, and grounded in personal meaning. Her refusal to domesticate or dilute her beliefs forces Rae to listen, not just intellectually, but spiritually. In this sense, Sammar does not assimilate into Rae's world; instead, she transforms it, gently inviting him to cross the cultural bridge she constructs through her language and presence.

Throughout *The Translator*, Sammar's role as a translator extends beyond the act of rendering Arabic into English; she becomes a living embodiment of Islamic values and Sudanese culture, serving as a powerful cultural mediator in Rae's life. Even as she attempts

to translate Islamic concepts and sacred texts for him, it is ultimately through her demeanor, modesty, and inner strength that Rae comes to understand the essence of her faith. Her character silently yet profoundly communicates the ethics of Islam. (Ayres 1-2) Illustratively, when she visited him in the Hospital, and cooked for him while he was sick:

> She made soup for him. She cut up courgettis, celery and onions. Her feelings were in the soup. The froth that rose to the surface of water when she boiled the chicken ... It seems unfair to her that he was all alone, ill alone, that he dragged himself to teach every day and comeback home to an unmade bed, unwashed cups and dishes, meals that he had to cook himself. (97)

This scene powerfully illustrates how Sammar's role as a translator transcends the professional realm and becomes an embodied act of cultural and spiritual expression. By preparing soup for Rae and caring for him during his illness, Sammar enacts the Islamic values of compassion (rahma), generosity (karam), and service (khidma), which are central to Muslim ethics. Her actions reflect not submission or subservience, as often misconstrued in orientalist representations of Muslim women, but strength, dignity, and care rooted in faith. The intimacy and intention with which she cooks for Rae and that "her feelings were in the soup" demonstrate how love and spiritual values can be communicated through quiet, everyday acts. Without preaching or overt instruction, Sammar shows Rae a lived Islam, one that is gentle, nurturing, and emotionally rich. These moments of domestic kindness serve as non-verbal translations of her cultural and religious identity, challenging Western stereotypes that frame Islam as rigid or oppressive. Aboulela thus uses Sammar's character to humanize Islam, showing that true understanding can emerge not only through words but through embodied, relational acts of care and presence. In this way, Sammar's translation is not just linguistic, but it is emotional, spiritual, and profoundly human. (Fernández 39)

Later, in the end of the first chapter of the novel, and after a little period of time when both

Sammar and Rae did share that they have feelings toward each other, Sammar asked Rae to convert to Islam to marry her, but though Rae is portrayed as someone well-versed in Islamic knowledge throughout the novel, he didn't convert directly:

> "If you say the *shahadah* it would be enough. We could get married. If you just say the words…"
>
> "I have to be sure. I would despise myself if I wasn't sure."
>
> "But people get married that way. Here in Aberdeen there are people who got married like that." (Aboulela 115)

This scene represents Sammar's ultimate failure as a translator, by concentrating solely on the outward form which is the recitation of the words, and instead she overlooks the deeper significance those words carry. It is not the words themselves, but the faith and conviction behind them, that grant them their true transformative power. In addition, she realizes that her error lies in wanting Rae to convert for personal reasons:

> There were people who drew others to Islam…. They did it for no personal gain, no worldly reason. They did it for Allah's sake. … And she, when she spoke to Rae, wanting this and that, full of it; wanting to … cook for him, to be settled, to be someone's wife. (Aboulela 160)

However, Rae's eventual conversion takes place only after Sammar's physical and emotional withdrawal, when she left Aberdeen and returned to Sudan. Her absence becomes a catalyst for his internal reflection and spiritual search. Rae ultimately realizes that faith is not something acquired solely through academic study or intellectual familiarity, thus he begins to seek a deeper, more sincere connection to faith. As he admits:

> "I found out at the end, that it didn't have anything to do with how much I've read or how many facts I've learned about Islam. Knowledge is necessary, that's true. But faith, it comes direct from Allah."

It was a miracle, she thought. (Aboulela 180).

Months later, following their emotional confrontation over Rae's unwillingness to embrace Islam, and Sammar's return to her family in Sudan, which was a move that symbolizes both her personal heartbreak and her reaffirmation of faith and cultural identity, his arrival in Khartoum and his quiet declaration that he has said the shahadah signifies not a concession, but a personal and transformative commitment. Indicating that, this act is no longer prompted by romantic desire alone but emerges from genuine belief, a faith that, as he comes to understand, "comes direct from Allah." Additionally to Sammar's influence, which has worked as a form of cultural and spiritual translation that went far beyond words, touching Rae in ways that academic study could not. The novel ends with a sense of optimism, as Sammar and Rae envision a future together, preparing for marriage, a trip to Egypt, and eventually returning to Aberdeen to begin their new life as a united couple. This resolution does not erase the cultural and religious tensions that preceded it, but it shows that mutual respect, spiritual openness, and emotional honesty can overcome even the most profound divides. Aboulela offers not just a romantic ending, but a deeply symbolic one: the possibility of building cross-cultural bridges through faith, understanding, and the subtle, often invisible labor of translation, both linguistic and lived. (Al Adwan and Abu Amrieh 350-352)

3.3. Bridging Worlds Through Translation: Dismantling Hierarchies in *The Translator*

In *The Translator* (1999), translation serves as more than a linguistic activity, it becomes a profound cultural and ideological act. Through Sammar, as a Sudanese Muslim widow and Arabic-English translator living in Scotland, Aboulela explores how translation can bridge the perceived chasm between East and West. Sammar's discourse, shaped by her faith and cultural identity, acts as a form of resistance to the dominant Eurocentric narratives that portray Islam as incompatible with modernity. By reinterpreting Islamic belief and Arab identity through a deeply personal and spiritual lens, Sammar challenges Western

assumptions and offers a counter-discourse that undermines hierarchical structures and binary oppositions. Through Sammar's role as both a literal and figurative translator, Aboulela dismantles Eurocentric hierarchies and reclaims Islamic identity as rational, spiritual, and universally meaningful. (Kersani168)

The act of translation in the novel is symbolic of a broader cultural negotiation between two seemingly incompatible worldviews. Sammar does not merely translate words; she translates a way of being rooted in Islam to a secular, Western audience. Her work at the university and her relationship with Rae Isles, become platforms for this cultural exchange. Clare Brandabur observes that Aboulela employs the theme of translation to promote dialogue and understanding between Islam and the West, emphasizing that this exchange should be based on mutual respect rather than being shaped by Western norms. Sammar's engagement with Islamic texts and ideas is neither apologetic nor exoticized. She presents Islam not as an "Other" to be interpreted through Western frameworks, but as a fully developed worldview that deserves its own terms of reference. In this way, Sammar's translation becomes an act of cultural re-centering, challenging the West's assumed position as epistemological authority. (Brandabur 221)

In one notable scene, Sammar passionately explains the beauty and logic of Islam to Rae, challenging his academic and secular approach. She tells Rae that Western portrayals of Islam are distorted and superficial, emphasizing how the West reduces Islamic belief to violence or repression. When Rae expresses interest in Islam from an intellectual standpoint, Sammar insists that understanding Islam requires faith, not just academic detachment**.** She says: "You can't understand it like that. You have to believe in it first." (Aboulela 107) Sammar is not just translating language but translating worldviews, trying to bridge a spiritual and cultural gap. Her insistence on faith as a prerequisite to understanding Islam challenges the Western Enlightenment assumption that knowledge must be empirical and detached. Instead, she

offers a deeply personal, affective, and spiritual framework, a counter-discourse to dominant Western narratives. Through this exchange, Aboulela uses Sammar to reclaim Islamic identity as one rooted in rationality, spirituality, and emotional depth. Thus undermining binary constructs like West vs. East, rational vs. irrational, modern vs. traditional. This moment captures how translation in the novel functions not merely as language transfer, but as a cultural and ideological negotiation. (Mosleh and Kaosar Ahmed 23-24)

Sammar's discourse resists the dominant Orientalist narrative that frames Islam as irrational or oppressive. She embodies what Edward Said identifies as a necessary counter-narrative to Orientalism, one that comes from within the cultural and religious context being described (Said 327). Through her conversations with Rae, Sammar systematically dismantles assumptions about Islam, offering instead a vision of faith grounded in love, discipline, and transcendence. For example, when Rae suggests that religion is a private or archaic matter, Sammar calmly but firmly responds with references to the Qur'an and her lived experience. She does not adopt a secular language to explain her faith; rather, she uses Islamic terminology and logic, asserting the integrity of her belief system. This discursive strategy positions her not as an object of study, but as a subject with agency, capable of interpreting and reshaping the conversation. (Smyth 177)

Eurocentrism often positions the West as the center of reason, modernity, and progress, while relegating non-Western cultures to the periphery. In *The Translator*, Aboulela reverses this dynamic. Sammar's faith is not seen as a barrier to understanding, but as a source of wisdom. Her belief in the unseen (ghayb), submission to God (Islam), and emotional restraint are presented not as signs of backwardness, but as rational, intentional, and profoundly human. Waïl Hassan argues that Aboulela's fiction presents an Islamic way of understanding the world as a legitimate and valuable perspective within the context of postcolonial and global narratives. Sammar's inner world is not defined by loss or marginalization, but by clarity,

discipline, and spiritual richness, qualities that subtly question the moral and spiritual emptiness of secular Western life. Eventually, translation in *The Translator* is not a one-way process. Rae is not simply a recipient of Islamic ideas; he is changed by them. Through his interactions with Sammar, he begins to question his own assumptions and opens himself to transformation. This mutuality suggests that true translation in the cultural and spiritual sense, requires humility and openness from both sides. Rae begins to understand that Islamic spirituality offers something missing in his secular worldview, which represents a dismantling of Eurocentric superiority, illustrating how Western identity can be enriched (not threatened) by engaging with Islamic thought. (Hassan 76)

In the end, in *The Translator*, Leila Aboulela employs the act of translation as a powerful tool to challenge cultural hierarchies and dismantle the East–West binary. Through the discourse of Sammar, the novel's protagonist, Aboulela subverts Eurocentric representations of Islam and asserts the validity of an Islamic worldview. Translation in this context transcends its conventional linguistic function; it becomes an emotional, spiritual, and ideological act. As such, it operates as a form of decolonial resistance, reclaiming voice, reasserting subjectivity, and promoting cross-cultural understanding. Importantly, Sammar does not seek to dissolve the distinctions between East and West into a single, homogenized identity. Instead, she constructs a bridge between the two, one grounded in mutual respect and spiritual integrity, demonstrating that cultural difference can coexist with equality, and that divergence does not necessitate hierarchy. (Araujo170)

3.4. Conclusion

This chapter examined how translation, both linguistic and cultural, functions as a central mechanism for building cross-cultural bridges in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*. It explored how translation is not limited to the technical rendering of language, but operates metaphorically to convey values, beliefs, and emotional depth across cultural and religious

boundaries. Through the protagonist, Sammar, Aboulela presents translation as a multidimensional act, one that facilitates not only communication between Arabic and English, but also understanding between the Islamic East and the secular West.

Sammar's role as a translator places her at the intersection of two worlds, allowing her to articulate and embody Islamic principles through both language and action. Her efforts to explain the Qur'an, correct misconceptions, and live out her faith in a Western context illustrate the deeper layers of cultural translation. While her verbal translations introduce Rae to Islamic teachings, it is her character, moral strength, and spiritual sincerity that truly resonate with him, demonstrating how faith and culture can be translated through lived experience.

Ultimately, the chapter highlighted how Sammar's work as a translator enables the development of her relationship with Rae, a bond that gradually evolves into mutual respect, spiritual understanding, and love. Their eventual union, marked by Rae's genuine conversion and their plans for a shared future, serves as a symbolic culmination of successful cultural translation. Thus, Aboulela's novel positions translation not merely as a profession, but as a transformative, bridging force, capable of fostering empathy, challenging stereotypes, and uniting individuals across deep cultural divides.

General Conclusion

General conclusion

This thesis has examined how Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* constructs cross-cultural bridges through the themes of language, identity, hybridity, religion, and otherness. In doing so, it contributes to a larger body of postcolonial literature in which many Arab and Muslim writers have actively defended Islam against widespread Western misconceptions. Drawing on Edward Said's theory of orientalism, this study has shown how *The Translator* challenges dominant narratives that portray Islam as backward, oppressive, or incompatible with modernity. Aboulela, like other writers from the Global South, refutes these reductive representations by offering a narrative grounded in lived experience and faith. Moreover, through the voice of her protagonist Sammar, she addresses Gayatri Spivak's question Can the Subaltern Speak? by allowing a Muslim woman not only to speak, but to assert her spiritual agency and intellectual autonomy within a Western context that often marginalizes or silences such voices.

At the heart of the novel lies the concept of translation, not only in its linguistic sense, but also as a metaphor for cross-cultural communication and understanding. This dissertation has explored how Sammar, as a translator of both language and culture, acts as a mediator between two distinct worlds: the Islamic East and the secular West. Translation becomes a symbolic act of negotiation, where meanings are not simply transferred but reinterpreted in light of context, identity, and worldview. Aboulela uses this metaphor to reveal the complexities of intercultural dialogue and to critique the power dynamics inherent in who gets to speak, interpret, and define the "other."

Sammar's journey from emotional isolation and cultural dislocation to a state of self-affirmation and spiritual clarity parallels the novel's broader engagement with hybridity. Through her experience as a Sudanese Muslim woman living in Scotland, Sammar embodies a hybrid identity that resists binary classifications. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of the

"third space," this dissertation has argued that *The Translator* imagines hybridity not as fragmentation or loss, but as a fertile ground for personal growth and cross-cultural understanding. Sammar does not abandon her Islamic values to integrate into the West; rather, she brings them into a new cultural space, reshaping both herself and her surroundings.

In exploring the theme of otherness, this dissertation has shown how Aboulela challenges the Western construction of the Muslim woman as silent, submissive, or oppressed. Sammar's strength is not rooted in defiance of her faith, but in her commitment to it. Aboulela's portrayal dismantles essentialist views and asserts that empowerment can be faith-based and culturally specific. In this way, the novel critiques dominant feminist discourses that fail to account for non-Western perspectives and highlights the importance of listening to voices that have been historically silenced or misrepresented.

Aboulela joins a lineage of Arab and Muslim writers who counter the legacies of orientalist discourse by reclaiming narrative authority. By representing Islam as a lived and deeply meaningful framework rather than a monolithic ideology, *The Translator* humanizes a religion too often portrayed through a lens of fear and misunderstanding. The novel serves as a form of cultural resistance, addressing the epistemic violence committed by colonial discourse and offering alternative, authentic perspectives. As such, it exemplifies the postcolonial effort to speak back to empire not with hostility, but with clarity, compassion, and intellectual depth.

In conclusion, this dissertation has demonstrated that *The Translator* is a profound literary exploration of how literature can bridge cultural divides and dismantle entrenched stereotypes. Through themes of translation, hybridity, and otherness, and grounded in a postcolonial theoretical framework, the novel challenges Western misconceptions about Islam and offers a nuanced, empathetic view of Muslim identity. In an era marked by polarization and cultural

misunderstanding, Aboulela's work underscores the transformative potential of literature to foster dialogue, reshape narratives, and build genuine cross-cultural connection.

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Appendices

Appendices

Appendix A: Leila Aboulela

Figure 1. A picture of the Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela

Aboulela, Leila Leila Aboulela was born in 1964 in Cairo, to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father. She moved to Sudan at the age of six weeks and lived in Khartoum continuously until 1987. Leila learnt English at the Khartoum American School and at the Sisters' School, a private Catholic High school. She graduated with a degree in Economics from the University of Khartoum specializing in Statistics. She then travelled to Britain where she was awarded a M.Sc. and an MPhil in Statistics from the London School of Economics. In 1990 Leila moved to Scotland with her husband and children. She started writing in 1992 while working as a lecturer in Aberdeen College and later as a Research Assistant in Aberdeen University. From 2000, Leila and her family lived in Jakarta, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha before moving back, in 2012, to Aberdeen. (Aboulela)

Figure 1. Aboulela, Leila. "Leila Aboulela." *Grove Atlantic: An Independent Literary Publisher Since 1917*, Grove Atlantic, https://groveatlantic.com/author/leila-aboulela/.

Appendix B: The Translator

Figure 2. Presents an image of Leila Aboulela's The Translator

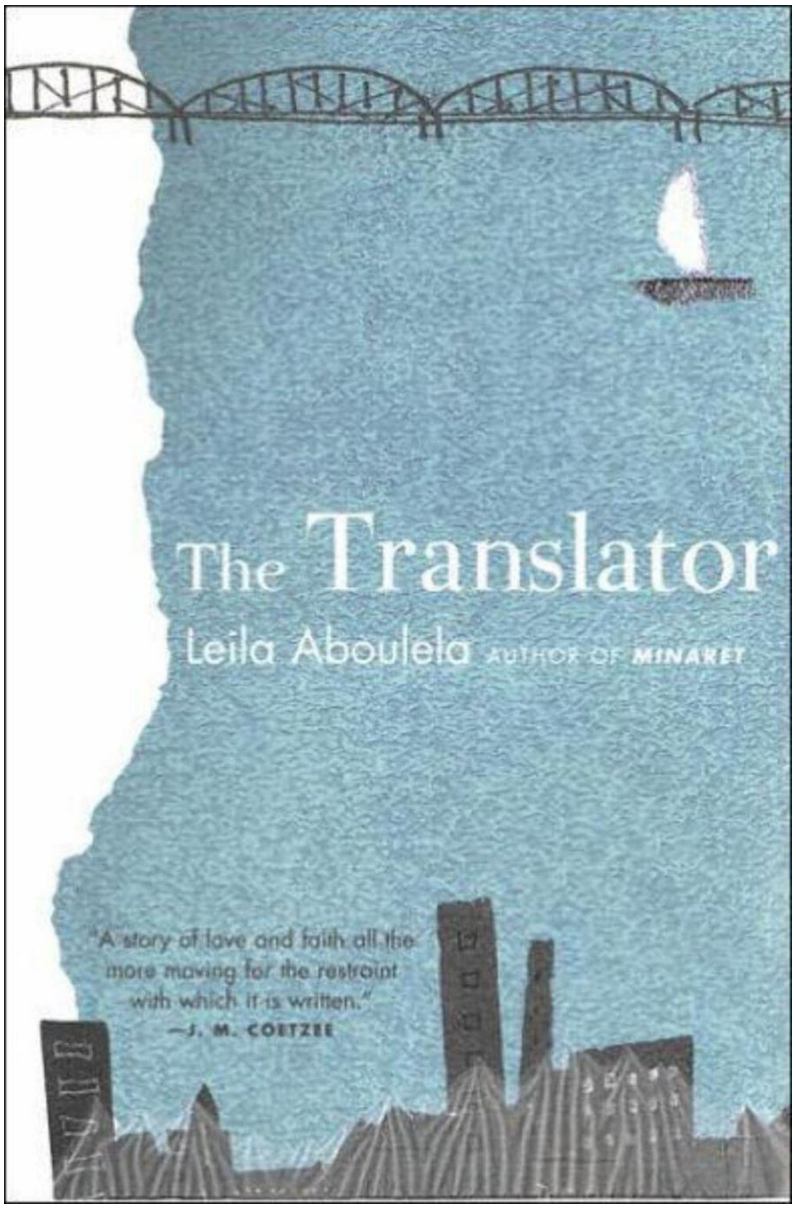

Figure2. Aboulela, Leila. *The Translator*. 1st American ed., Black Cat, 2006.

Glossary of Key Terms

Diaspora The dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland. In postcolonial literature, it often refers to themes of migration, exile, and cultural displacement. (Braziel and Mannur 10)

Eurocentrism It is the worldview that centers Europe and its values, history, and experiences as universal, often marginalizing or devaluing non-European cultures and perspectives. It assumes that European culture is superior and uses it as a standard against which other societies are measured. (Shohat and Stam 2).

Hybridity A postcolonial concept describing the mixing of cultures and identities resulting from colonization or migration. In *The Translator*, hybridity reflects the protagonist's negotiation of Sudanese and Scottish identities. (Bhabha 114)

Islamophobia Prejudice, fear, or hatred toward Islam or Muslims. The novel implicitly resists Islamophobic narratives by offering an insider's perspective on faith. (Said, *Covering Islam* 45)

Otherness A postcolonial term referring to the construction of people or cultures as fundamentally different or alien. The novel interrogates Western constructions of Muslim "otherness." (Said, *Orientalism* 332)

Postcolonialism A critical framework that analyzes the cultural, political, and economic legacies of colonialism. It explores issues of identity, representation, power, and resistance in formerly colonized societies. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2)

Silence Often used symbolically to represent marginalization or emotional suppression. In the novel, silence is also a tool for reflection and cultural expression. (Trinh 28)