Celebrating Islamic Culture in Aboulela's "The Translator"

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Abstract:

There has always been a widely shared commonsense thinking vis-à-vis Arab culture in general and Islamic culture in particular as being unchanging, backward, and fundamentalist. As a result, many writers with Muslim backgrounds undertook the challenge to dispel these stereotypical views. In fact, through their writings, they defied any misconception and spoke articulately to the uniqueness and splendidness of their culture. Among these writers is the British Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela. In her debut novel *'The Translator',* the author gives fascinating insights into the world of Islam through an authentic portrayal of a devout Muslim widow called Sammar. The latter lives in Aberdeen where she works as a translator of Islamic texts and articles from Arabic to English. Despite her direct exposure to Scottish culture, Sammar resists any kind of assimilation as she clings to her faith, customs, traditions, and religious values. Hence, the present paper attempts to examine Aboulela's celebration of Islamic culture through an analytical study of the protagonist's allegiance and adherence to hijab, Arabic language, prayers, fasting, and reading the Qur'an.

Keywords: Hijab; Islamic culture; Muslim; Qur'an; The Translator.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic culture has always been so consciously thought through due to the fictitious, reductionist as well as stereotyped images by which Arab Muslims become labeled as reactionaries, fundamentalists, and backward. By dint of that, many writers of Arab Muslim descent took it upon themselves to eliminate these misgivings about them and their culture including the Anglophone Sudanese novelist Aboulela whose first work *The Translator* celebrates the Islamic culture through the protagonist's allegiance and adherence to her faith owing to her well understanding of its wisdom as she embraces her hijab and her religious practices such as fasting, praying and reciting the Qur'an.

2. Western (mis) Representation of Islamic World

Whenever the word Islam or Muslims is mentioned, a fundamental question is often raised which is the misconception or misrepresentation of it. Over the last few decades, there has been a proliferation of discussions, whether in print or visual media, that have taken Islam and Muslims as their focus. The majority of these discussions have coupled Muslims and Islam with terrorism, violence, tyranny and extremism. Writing in *The Observer*, Will Hutton states that:

> Islam is predominantly sexist and pre-Enlightenment and that is the core of the problem both within the Islamic world and in its relationship with the West. Thus, the West has to object to Islamic sexism whether arranged marriage, headscarves, limiting career options or the more extreme manifestations, female circumcision and stoning women for adultery. (Cited in Meer, 2010, p. 194)

That is to say for him, Islam equates all that is backward and negative as being the source of all issues. This erroneous portrayal discredits and denigrates the culture, faith, and integrity of Muslims. In fact, it fatally flaws their self-esteem and the way they see themselves to the extent that they become entrapped as De Bois (1903) argues "our worst side has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying that we ever had a worst side [so that] in all sorts of ways we are hemmed in" (p. 127). This explains the crucial role of both print and visual media. The latter can perpetuate either a negative or a positive image of anyone or anything. However, in both cases, people tend to take things for granted since they believe all that they receive regardless of its credibility. Therefore, mass media is so threatening since it can contribute to people's understanding – or misunderstanding of each other's countries.

3. Islamophobia

The dangerousness of media lies in its construction of what is universally acknowledged as Islamophobia. The latter is composed of two words: Islam and Phobia. While the former is the religious faith of Muslims, the latter refers to fear beyond reason. The combination of the two means the unjustified fear, detestation, and hostility towards Islam and Muslims that is, the definition of Islamophobia. When it comes to its neologism and origin, there are many ongoing debates culminating in a range of different theories. One of these theories states that the founding father of the phrase

'Islamophobia' was an editor named Fuad Nahdi. Whereas, another theory claims that the incorporation of the term for the first time occurred during the Iranian revolution to describe a woman for her rejection of the wearing of the headscarf. Yet, neither of the two versions has an absolute credence.

Regardless of its use and origin, Islamophobia proves to be "a threat to our societies and to the values of human rights, pluralist democracy and the valuing of diversity as an asset" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 6). It is a violation of Muslims' rights by which they become exposed to various kinds of discrimination and marginalization across many spheres such as education, employment, housing, traveling and other domestic services, not only this, but they even encounter racial insults and physical attacks because of their religious or ethnic affiliations rather than because of their deeds. According to the Council on American-Islamic Relations: "in 2004, there has been 49 percent increase in the reported cases of harassment, violence and discriminatory treatment from 2003" which "marks the highest number of Muslim civil rights cases ever reported to CAIR in our eleven year history"(Cited in Curtis IV, 2010, p. 130).

It is worth stressing that all of this disdain, persecution, and hostility towards Muslims threatened not only their sense of security as they no longer felt safe, but also shook their sense of identity as the majority of them suffered from lack of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-pride to the extent they start to feel ashamed of their origin and culture as a consequence they underwent traumatic experiences of non-belonging, alienation, inferiority and marginalization which prevented them from integration within the whole society, on the one hand, and culminated in their identity crisis on the other.

Most people think that these Islamophobic attacks were the byproducts of 9/11. Though it is true that the horrific events of September 11, 2001, unleashed an unforgettable annihilation which in turn left Muslims in a vulnerable position being identified as responsible for all the unendurable pain that Americans suffered from after that ghastly September day, one cannot ignore the fact that even " before the hijackers piloted the plumes into the Twin Towers, Muslims were already living in a context where they and their faith were viewed as different, strange, foreign, violent, oppressive, and threatening"(Peek, 2011, p. 59). In other words, Muslims' persecution has a pre 9/11 context. Yet, it has also a post 9/11 context.

4. Muslims before and after 9/11

After the assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it becomes quite clear that Muslims were about to undergo one of the worst nightmarish experiences in which they turn to be the primary targets of maltreatment and abuse as they were called "turban-wearing, towel-headed, dirty camel loving terrorists"(Cited in Al Maleh, 2009, p. 435). These offensive slurs were not the only violations that Muslims were obliged to deal with. According to Carol Khawly, "immediately after the attacks, the Arab-American community and those immigrants from the Arab or Muslim worlds, experienced an unprecedented backlash in the form of hate crimes, discrimination and various civil liberties violations" (Cited in Salaita, 2007, p. 115).

Apart from all the aforementioned fallout, the 9/11 events assured one thing, the reinforcement of the negative stereotyping of Muslims. Indeed, before the 9/11 incident, the Islamic world witnessed awful events. The latter impaired the image of Muslims worldwide, to cite an example, the Rushdie Affair. In 1988, the Indian British author Salman Rushdie published his most controversial novel under the title "The Satanic Verses". For many Muslims, the book represents "a gratuitously blasphemous assault on their faith" (Malik, 2009, p. 2) as it contains several misinterpretations about Islam and gives a wrong depiction of the Quran and the prophet Muhammed. Soon, anti-Rushdi protests swept London culminating in the burning of the book. Things; however, intensified when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa sentencing Rushdi and all those who participated in the novel's publication to death. He informed:

> All Muslims in the world that the author of the book, The Satanic Verses,   which is against Islam, the prophet and the Qur'an, and all those who have published it are condemned to death. I call on courageous Muslims to execute them as soon as possible wherever they may be. (Cited in Allen, 2010, p. 42)

Through his fatwa, the leader of the Iranian Revolution took the conflict to another level as he turned it to be a matter of whole Muslims all over the world. Ultimately, many violent attacks took place, some of which ended up by the killing of the Japanese as well as the Italian translators of the novel. At that point, the Western World came to realize the presence of Islam as a major political issue in their societies. This marked the beginning of the disparagement of anything Muslim without differentiation.

The Gulf war is also another momentous event through which the Western world developed negative opinions vis-à-vis Muslims. It started when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1991 due to disputes over territorial sovereignty, security and oil prices. Though it lasted for a short time, the crisis was unusual for two reasons: one, for the first time in the history of inter-Arab relations, an Arab Muslim country raids its sister-state and attempts to eliminate it; two, more than thirty countries were dragged into the war whether directly or not. The United States was on the top of the list leading the coalition force against Iraq culminating in the latter's defeat.

During this Iraqi invasion, satellite television came to the fore as an effective tool that kept the world updated in terms of its coverage of the war's news including the battlefield, casualties, and so on. In this vein, Finlan (2003) asserts, "the war against Iraq heralded a new type of media experience: 24- hour war coverage, which seemed to bring the civilian observer around the world closer to the action than ever before" (p. 58). Albeit, the majority of these accounts were filtered to serve the interests of those who have control over it. However, what is more striking about the Gulf crisis is its ability to reveal the conflict of the future that Huntington (1996) glossed as the 'Clash of Civilizations' in his most discussed book "*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*". Through this work, he explored the ongoing struggle between the West and Islam. According to him, "conflicts between the West and Islam thus focus less

on territory than on broader intercivilizational issues such as weapons proliferation, human rights and democracy, control of oil, migration, Islamist terrorism, and Western intervention" (p. 212).

Such events as the Rushdie Affair, the Gulf War, and the 9/11 attacks ignited the spark of opposition and conflict between the western world and the Islamic one as they put up more barriers which in turn accentuated and became exceedingly more difficult to resolve. Most of these obstacles are because the Islamic World is always seen through the lenses of Orientalism. The latter refers to "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of time) "the Occident; and a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient, for describing it, authorising views about it and dominating it" (Said, 1978, p. 2). In fact, this system perceives the Orient as the Other, that it is to say, as exotic and different and "because of difference, the Other can be a source of anxiety and even threat" (Kenny, 2007, p. 99). In this case, the Other stands for the Islamic World which represents the lasting danger for the West.

5. Celebrating Islamic culture in "The Translator"

Outraged by all the prejudices and claims against Muslims in general and Islam in particular that condemn them to be the source of threat and terror, many people with Muslim backgrounds took the challenge to argue against these claims in an attempt to eradicate them once for all. Some of them become part of Organizations that called for the protection of the Islamic World against any violations, while others prefer to dedicate their pens to dispel all the misinterpretations. Those writers become more defiant and more adamant about providing an authentic self-representation as well as about celebrating the richness and uniqueness of their culture in order to "maintain the integrity of that culture against western onslaught" (Huntington, 1996, p. 213).

Leila Aboulela is among those writers. She is one of the contemporary world Islamic novelists. Despite her short career, Aboulela has accomplished several literary awards and has received critical praise including the initial Caine Prize for the African Booker in 2000 for her short story The Museum from her collection of short stories *Coloured Lights*. Her first novel *The Translator* was long-listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction and was labeled as a Notable Book of the Year by the New York Times in 2006.

The Translator was published in 1999 in England; it chronicles the story of a devout widow Muslim called Sammar. The latter lives in Aberdeen where she works at university as a translator of Islamic texts and articles from Arabic to English for a well-recognized Scottish scholar named Rae Isles whom she falls in love with and cannot be with because "they lived in worlds divided by simple facts- religion, country of origin, race- data that fills forms" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 34). However, all of these barriers vanish when Rae converts to Islam and becomes able to marry each other.

Despite her direct exposure to Scottish culture, Sammar resists any kind of assimilation "she knew the feeling this has nothing to do with me, these shops, these people have nothing to do with me, this sky is not for me (p. 103). Instead, she carves out a space of her own where she clings to her faith, customs, traditions, and religious values, in other words,

to her Islamic culture. Accordingly, she makes Islam present in her daily life in the West starting with her dress. Through her choice of wearing a headscarf, the protagonist reinforces one truth that the hijab is much more than an outward covering. It is a source of dignity and self-empowerment, an emblem of her identity by which she sets an example for others that transcends the typical view of "the veiled woman as an icon of oppression"(Cited in Kaid, 2013, p. 110). It was thanks to her insistence on being veiled that others were obliged to accept it. The latter told her: "I have no problem at all with the way you dress" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 100).

After Tarig's death, Sammar finds relief in the recitation of Quran and prayers. These religious rituals strengthen her as they diminish her sense of loss and make her pain tolerable:

> 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. When she finished praying she sat for the tasbeeh, her thumb counting on each segment of her fingers, three for each finger, fifteen for a hand, Astaghfir Allah, Astaghfir Allah, Astaghfir Allah, . . . I seek forgiveness from Allah ... I seek forgiveness from Allah. (p. 37)

In addition to reading Qur'an and praying, what makes her also feel content and delighted is whenever she eats date and drinks water at the sunset after fasting all the day in Ramadan, she " *felt herself to be simple,* someone with a simple need, easily fulfilled, easily granted. The dates and the water made her heart feel big, with no hankering or tanginess or grief" (p. 37). The more she adheres to her religion, the more she becomes happy, strong and satisfied in an exotic world that attempts to shake her sense of identity by treating her as an alien.

Being a devout Muslim, Sammar follows Shari'a or Islamic law in every aspect of her life. Though she lives in a country where Shari'a is regarded as an oppressive system that dictates on people the way they should live depriving them of their freedom, Sammar finds it more contributing to her wellbeing. The most illustrious example is after her husband's death. Following the instructions of Islamic law, she spends a mourning period of four months and ten days. According to her, this period embodies "how Allah's shari'a was kinder and more balanced than the rules people set up for themselves" (p. 69). Another instance is when she refuses to marry Rae ignoring her feelings since it is against the Islamic code as being not Muslim. This explains her reply to Yasmin's question of whether she is going to marry him or not "of course not, that would be against the shari'a" (p. 92).

Sammar, due to her job, acts like a "cultural mediator" (Al Maleh, 2009). Simply because, she does not only translate texts from Arabic to English but also transmits her Islamic culture through " molding Arabic into English, trying to be transparent like a pane of glass not obscuring the meaning of any word" (Cited in Chambers, 2009, p. 4). Her mastery of English helps her a lot, as it provides her with "remarkable power" (Fanon, 1967, p. 18). This power embodies in her ability to provide Rae with genuine and fascinating translation and even interpretation of Qur'an and Hadith that drags him to delve deep into Islam ending up by his conversion. This act of conversion reverses the

conventional belief in superiority as well as the domination of Western culture over the Islamic one.

Regardless of her mastery of English, Sammar continues to incorporate Arabic religious terms such as Allah, azan, masjid, hijab, tasbeeh, and Insha' Allah. All of these terms signify the distinctiveness of Islamic culture in comparison to other cultures. As Lewis (2004) states, "there is something in the religious culture of Islam which inspired, in even the humblest peasant or peddler, a dignity and a courtesy towards others never exceeded and rarely equaled in other civilizations" (p. 329).

6. CONCLUSION

The Translator is a story of a young devout widow. The latter remains allegiant to her faith, culture, and love. Through this novel, Aboulela proves that Islam is not a shame-based culture. Accordingly, she deploys Sammar's hijab, prayers, language, behavior, and even job to open a window into her cultural world, celebrating its richness, validity, and uniqueness.

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