# *Writing Back between Resistance and Resilience in Leila Aboulela's The Translator*

# المعارضة الأدبية بين المقاومة والمرونة في رواية "المترجمة" لليلى أبو العـلا

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**Abstract:**

   Oscillating between resistance and resilience, Leila Aboulela's The Translator (1999) seeks to initiate a cross-cultural dialogue without compromising the right to self-representation. The novel adopts the postcolonial strategies of resistance and writing back to the hegemonic discourse about Arabs and Muslims. In rather a mild tone, however, Aboulela engages in a cultural dialogue between the West and the East. Moreover, The Translator adapts English so as to suit the cultural context in which it is employed. This paper aims to spot light on the erroneous conceptualisation of Islam and Muslims in the academic Western discourse. Through a brief analysis of The Translator within the postcolonial framework, this study shows that Aboulela opts for a discourse of mediation by adopting cross-cultural dialogue rather than a discourse of confrontation.

**Keywords**: Cross-cultural dialogue - Orientalism - resilience - resistance - The Translator.

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الملخص:

بتأرجحها بين المقاومة والمرونة، تسعى رواية 'المترجِمة' (1999) لليلى أبو العلا لبدء حوار ثقافي دون التنازل عن الحق في تمثيل الذات. تعتمد الرواية استراتيجيات ما بعد الاستعمار كالمعارضة وإعادة كتابة الخطاب المهيمن حول العرب والمسلمين. ومع ذلك تنخرط أبو العلا، بنبرتها المعتدلة، في حوار ثقافي بين الغرب والشرق. من ناحية أخرى، تقوم رواية 'المترجِمة' بتطويع اللغة الإنجليزية لتلائم السياق الثقافي الذي وُظِّفَتْ فيه. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على المفاهيم الخاطئة حول الإسلام والمسلمين في الخطاب الغربي الأكاديمي. من خلال تحليل موجز لـ'المترجِمة' في سياق أدب ما بعد الاستعمار، تبين هذه الدراسة أن أبو العلا تبنَّتْ خطاب الوساطة باعتماد الحوار بين الثقافات بدلاً من خطاب المواجهة.

**الكلمـات المفتاحيـة:** الحوار بين الثقافات، الاستشراق، المرونة، المقاومة، 'المترجِمة'.

## 1. Introduction

At the very heart of postcoloniality lies the notion of writing back, subverting, and reversing the colonial discourse. Postcolonial writers and critics have exerted themselves to reverse the Western portrayal of the cultural Other. In this respect, writing back as a response to the detrimental representations in Western media and literature has always been one of the enduring characteristics of postcolonial literature. Men of letters together with critics and academics spared no effort to negate hegemonic views of Islam and the East. However, the assertive postcolonial discourse as a reaction to the Western discourse underwent a shift that rendered it more resilient and less antagonistic. At the dawn of the new millennium, a brand new postcolonial literature took the lead towards a novel trend of representation or, to some extent, a presentation of the dialogue between the East, read, the Muslim World, and the West. In this regard, Arab Anglophone writers[1] have been working to pave the way to the emergence of a sub-genre of postcolonial literature known as Anglophone Arab fiction.

It is of postcolonial nature for the simple fact that it is a literary trend that aims at resisting the current, well-established depiction of non-Westerners, read, Arabs and Muslims. These writers claim a legitimate space in the arena of cultural representation *vis-à-vis* the Western literary production which is replete with fallacies due to their biased projection

of Islam and Muslims. The transnational literary works written by Anglophone Arabs seem to serve as an alternative to the early postcolonial writing that radically debunks and rebuke the colonial, imperial, and orientalist depiction of the Orient. In this regard, this paper aims to analyse Aboulela's novel, *The Translator,* in the light of the concepts of Orientalism, resistance, and cross-cultural dialogue.

## 2. Anglophone Arab Fiction and the Quest for Self-Representation

The need for self-representation reassures itself in the writings of postcolonial novelists who took it on themselves to eradicate the deep-seated myths of Islam in the Western collective consciousness. They aspire to reshape and represent the Muslim character through narratives that play a significant role in the construction of the discourse of Islam and the West. The tension between the two poles of conflict has been the outcome of accumulated erroneous beliefs and long episodes of misunderstanding dating back to the early centuries of Islam. In *Orientalism* (2003), Edward Said argues that the "relation between Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical" (Said, 2003, p. 222). That is to say, for the simple fact that incorporeal distances from the Oriental civilisation render the orientalist partly ignorant, partly unable to fully fathom the Oriental culture. Given that not all aspects of culture are tangible, all that which the orientalist intellectual can strive to understand is the patent facets of culture or the 'cultural monument'. In the course of decoding the cultural Other, the orientalist tends to diminish that which he fails to understand by interpreting, considerately representing, and privately getting the inaccessible object (Said, 2003). Regardless of the efforts that might be made by the orientalist scholar to comprehend the Orient, the Orient is perpetually left beyond the Occident and the orientalist finds himself outside it (Said, 2003).

Pertinent to the imperialist discourse is the genre of literature known as clash Literature which stems its ideological rhetoric from Samuel Huntington's theory of clash of civilisations.[2] This literary trend introduces Islam to the West as an imminent threat to Western ideals.

Clash literature identifies the relationship between Islam and the West as that of enmity. The concept it strives to instill is that they are incompatible 'entities' with a long history of ideological animosity that often leads to military conflicts (Sharify-Funk, 2013). In this respect, the myopic Western characterisation of Islam and Muslims has resulted in a unilateral neocolonial construction of the Muslim subject. However, there has been no lack of self-representation on the part of Muslim scholars, intellectuals, novelists, and writers. Still, the question has always been how to write back effectively. In this sense, Youssef Yacoubi asserts:

> *Islamic consciousness has always thought itself inside the morass of colonial history and has produced its own representations, imaginings, and frustrations that reflected not only its capacity to speak back, but also the anxiety of its own incapacity to respond properly.* (Yacoubi, 2003, p. 138) (emphasis in original)

Likewise, an appropriate self-representation is necessary to reconstruct the deformed image of Islam and Muslims in the hegemonic discourse.

Henceforth, building on Said's concept of the relationship between the orientalist and the Orient, this paper attempts to shed light on the need to bridge the cultural rift and to fill the empty space left open for false interpretations and biased representations. A need seems to find its fulfillment at the hands of a nascent yet a significant literary genre taking part in the transnational literary arena. Anglophone Muslim writers took it on themselves to write back so as to cut short attempts of being misrepresented by those who know little to nothing about how it feels to be a Muslim. Diasporic as they are, their very presence in the West raises their awareness of the need to speak up for their right of self-representation. Straddling the two cultures, however, they come to see the urgency for bridging the cultural gap rather than engaging in a cultural confrontation. As such, Anglophone Muslim writers seem to fit into the role of cultural mediators between their culture of origin and that

of the host country. Through the employment of English language, Arab immigrant writers are often expected to translate their culture for their readers (Kersani & Mouro, 2020). By the same token, Leila Aboulela proves her ability to effectively meet the challenge in her novel, *The Translator*.

## 3. The North-South Encounter: From 'Season of Migration to the North' to 'The Translator':

In an insightful article entitled "Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction" (2008), Wail Hassan conducts a comparative study between Tayeb Salih and Leila Aboulela's novels and short stories with a particular focus on Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) and Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999). Hassan argues that the discourse in Salih's and Aboulela's novels represents the North and the South as opposites in terms of the climate, traditions, and culture. Moreover, Hassan goes on to affirm that just like Salih's *Season of Migration to the North,* so does Aboulela's *The Translator* which strives to modify the discursive and ideological norms of the hegemonic representation. However, Hassan contends, while both novels embark on the journeys of two young Sudanese characters to the North, *The Translator* is a North-South romance of which its happy ending alludes to the potentiality of bridging the chasm between the two cultures (Hassan, 2008). Still, unlike Aboulela's title character (Sammar), Salih's protagonist (Mustafa Sa'eed) fails to reconcile the contradictions of his life upon his return to Sudan. Behind the dramatic end of Salih's narrative is the failure of both the narrator and Sa'eed to elaborate a constructive cross-cultural connection (Hassan, 2008). This end alludes to the unsettled conflict between the North and the South in the postcolonial literature of Salih's generation.

Therefore, maintains Hassan, Aboulela's fiction takes on the challenge and completes Salih's project. Whereas his work mirrors the disillusionment of the 1960s and 1970s generations, hers is a story of recovery and fulfillment (Hassan, 2008). The Anglophone Islamic discourse introduces a new storyline logic to the postcolonial fiction that

attains its insight not in the European novel, like the writers of a former generation, but "in Qur'anic and other forms of Islamic literature (Sufi poetry, allegory, hadith, and so forth)" (Hassan, 2008, p. 299). It is in this sense that Aboulela undertakes the challenge of representation of the Muslim identity. Placed as she is in a position that offers her an excellent vantage point to see, understand, then represent her own culture in a way that is best understood by the West, Aboulela seizes the opportunity and brings the West and the East together. Building on Hassan's comparative study, this paper shows that the dichotomies of East and West, South and North, and the self and the Other still exist in the narratives of the new generation of postcolonial writers. Nonetheless, neither this distinctive portrayal accentuates the differences as to render them—the West and the East—as antithetical to one another nor can this demarcation be seen as an act of othering so much as it can be perceived as a mode of identification.[3]

## 4. Dismantling Western Supremacy in The Translator

In essence, *The Translator* negotiates the problematic portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Western academia. The plot is basically uncomplicated; yet, it is equally engaging. Sammar, the title character who is a Sudanese immigrant, lives in Scotland after the death of her husband, Tarig. She starts working as a translator in a university in Aberdeen. Accordingly, she meets Rae Isles, an Orientalist, a Middle-East historian, and a lecturer in the same university. Moreover, the presence of Yasmin, Sammar's Pakistani-born Scottish friend, enriches the discussion on the West-East relationship in the novel.

It is worth mentioning that distorting facts and propagating fallacies about the cultural Other has deep roots in the history of Orientalist discourse. Nevertheless, stigmatizing Islam as a potential threat to the Western ideals is no longer a matter of othering but a rhetoric of antagonism that takes on an unprecedented level in the discourse of Islam and the West. In a similar vein, Rae tells Sammar that in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, "there was a rush of writing, most of it misinformed. The threat that the whole region would be swept up in

this, very much exaggerated" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 109). Rae, writes a book under the title *The Illusions of an Islamic Threat*. He traces this feverish reaction against the Islamic rise to its religio-historical roots. Rae finds out that this has been the result of a long history of hostility between the West and the Middle East owing to the fact that, from the early days of its inception, Islam was charged with heresy by the church (Aboulela, 1999).

Ironically, some Western scholars who pride themselves on being impartial with regards to the Orient, may as well unconsciously perpetuate the discourse of Orientalism. In one of the conversations between Sammar and Yasmin, the latter identifies Rae, the Western scholar who is interested in Islam and the politics of the Middle East and North Africa, as an Orientalist. Sammar finds the description to be inaccurate, as her notion of Orientalists cannot be properly applied to Rae. She knows Orientalists to be "bad people who distorted the image of the Arabs and Islam. Something from school history or literature ..." (Aboulela, 1999, p. 21). Sammar's idea of orientalists finds its roots in Said's depiction of the Orientalist who stands at a distance thus unable to translate the culture of the East authentically. Perhaps that is why Sammar adds, "[m]aybe modern orientalists were different" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 21). Rae seems to fit well into this category, namely modern orientalists.

In fact, Rae was expelled from school for writing an essay about Islam under the title: "Islam is better than Christianity" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 17). In the fifties, his uncle David converted to Islam and married an Egyptian woman with whom he has children. Rae comments on that, "I had Egyptian cousins, relatives in Africa. I was very excited by that. I thought it was very romantic" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 18). Rae finds that having Egyptian cousins to be 'very romantic', which is an orientalist concept that feeds on romanticising all that which is connected with the East. Besides, regardless of how much these modern orientalists may know about Islam, it is still a mere academic interest. Yasmin emphasises that modern orientalists are to stay at a distance from the target culture

in order not to be accused of cultural betrayal by their compatriots and colleagues. In this respect, they should remain dedicated to their culture even if this loyalty renders them unable to utter the truth about Islam. By the same token, Yasmin alludes to the fact that Rae's conversion to Islam would be seen as an act of cultural betrayal (Aboulela, 1999). One might assume, therefore, that the Western academic environment is still unprepared to transcend its supremacist views of Islam and Muslims.

Equally important is the fact that those modern orientalists who attempt to detach themselves from both the culture they study or their own culture so that to remain non-judgmental are still found to be un/consciously racist. Rae attempts at detaching himself from either his culture or the culture of the Other. As an orientalist, albeit a modern one, and as an academic, he strives to be objective and to stand at a distance in order for his understanding of the cultural Other to be intact. About Islam and terrorism, Rae is fully aware that, unlike what both terrorists and the Western media try to convince their audiences, terrorism is not justified in the Islamic jurisprudence (Aboulela, 1999). Nevertheless, Rae's interest and prolific knowledge has nothing to do with spirituality. He studies Islam, the politics of North Africa, and the Middle East for the people and the place he cherishes; yet, the best he could offer them is to be detached (Aboulela, 1999). Again, Sammar replies to this from a postcolonial perspective, "[d]on't you realise how much you hurt me saying objective and detached, like you are above all of this, above me, looking down ..." (Aboulela, 1999, p. 126). Sammar's stance is justified at the end of the novel in the words of Rae who admits, "[w]hat I regret the most ... is I used to write things like "Islam gives dignity to those who otherwise would not have dignity in their lives"" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 199). Rae's confession highlights the fact that Western supremacists believe that Arabs lack any sense of dignity which is why they attempt at compensating their sense of inferiority by reverting to religion. Indeed, this characterisation of Arabs in relation both to Islam and to the West poses the question of whether Arabs lack inherent dignity due to their belonging to the 'Third World' countries or because they are non-

Westerns (Hassan, 2008). Either way, it remains unclear whether if not from Islam, Arabs would derive their dignity from conversion to Western creed and philosophy. In a similar vein, Hassan argues:

> *The paradox here, of course, is that even academics whose work is cross-cultural and who may be progressive on some issues, remain astonishingly prejudiced when it comes to Islam and Muslims.* (Hassan, 2008, p. 306)

Furthermore, dividing the world hierarchically into an advanced and civilised hemisphere (the Western World) and another which is less worthy, uncivilised one (Africa and the East) is a typical supremacist conjecture. In this sense, the deformation of the world map in Aboulela's novel says a lot about this notion. In one of the scattered magazines on the floor of Rae's flat there was a picture of a traditional map of the world wherein the continents are incorrectly depicted, "Europe appeared larger than South America, North America larger than Africa, Greenland larger than China, when the opposite was true" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 16). Sammar probes this map and another modern one which shows Africa as "a massive elongated yellow, Britain a rosy insignificance" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 16). Once again, *The Translator* detects the trail of Eurocentrism just to refute it and to show its impotence in the face of a fruitful dialogue between the North (the Western World) and the South (North Africa, the Muslim World, and the East). Unlike clash literature which repudiates dialogue in order to impede the advance of the peaceful coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims (Sharify-Funk, 2013), the writings of Anglophone Arab novelists espouse dialogue between the Western and the Islamic culture. Likewise, it should be noted that Aboulela often juxtaposes the viewpoints of Rae and Sammar from their different cultural angles —with intervals of Yasmin's radical standpoint. The conversations between Rae and Sammar, both of which are less severe about their stances, denote the potentiality of an effective cross-cultural dialogue between the two cultures.

## 5. *The Interplay between Language Appropriation and Cultural Representation*

To begin with, the protagonist's name itself suggests cultural differentiation. Sammar, is a name that would not be given to her had she been born in Sudan, "perhaps she would have been given a more common one" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 5). A name So rarely given to girls in Khartoum that she was the only Sammar at school and at college. When Rae asks about the meaning of her name, "[d]o you pronounce it like the season, summer?" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 5), Sammer replies, "[y]es, but it does not have the same meaning" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 5). She goes on, "[i]t means conversations with friends, late at night. It's what the desert nomads liked to do, talk leisurely by the light of the moon ..." (Aboulela, 1999, p. 5). Aboulela emphasises the cultural nuances of Sammar's name as she associates night's conversation with nomads' lifestyle. Moreover, by giving her protagonist a name that is neither a common one in Sudan nor an entirely strange in Scotland—in part for the familiarity of its rhythm—Aboulela assigns Sammar a position of betweenhood where she can smoothly oscillate back and forth between cultures. Hence, the meaning of the name per se (i.e. conversation) hints to the mission of the protagonist, and perhaps Aboulela's mission, as cultural representatives and mediators. On the other hand, Rae is a homonym to the word *rai'* which stands for 'opinion' in Arabic. Sammar comments on his name, "[y]es, ... He had lots of opinions" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 154). Sammar's statement reflects the different stereotypes and prejudices that orientalist intellectuals have on Islam and Muslims. Accordingly, Aboulela's choice of her characters' names is not in the least random. Rather, these names are loaded with cultural meanings. Sammar and Rae, therefore, come to represent Muslim and Western perspectives respectively.

Moreover, it should be noted that the employment of English in the novel should not be viewed as an act of betrayal to her native language and/or culture. Aboulela uses English in such a way that it risks no distortion on the part of her culture of origin. Rather, she deliberately inserts some Arabic words and phrases deeply rooted in the Muslim

rhetoric and Muslim culture and identity. These terms and expressions add specific cultural flavour to the novel. Anglophone Arab writers tend to bend English as it serves the cultural context of their writings. Despite the fact that Anglophone Arab writers are often expected to translate their culture through the employment of English; yet, Aboulela leaves a lot of transliteral phrases untranslated. These include, "Eid Mubarak" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 177), "*wudu"* (Aboulela, 1999, p. 185) (ablution, an Islamic ritual performed before engaging in prayer), "sharia" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 26) (Islamic jurisprudence), and "*Ya Allah, Ya Arham El-Rahimeen"* (Aboulela, 1999, p. 22). The usage of these expressions as such enables Aboulela to engage the reader into a sort of cultural communication. Thus, inviting the reader to take part in the translation process serves the novel's general purpose of promoting cross-cultural interaction.

It is worth mentioning, therefore, that the problematic of cultural untranslatability also results from the decontextualisation of a given text. Fragmentation of texts and pictures that are culture-bound leads to misconception when interpreted outside their cultural context. In *The Translator,* the fact that *Al-Nidaa* manifesto[4] is poorly photocopied alludes to distorted projection of Islam in Western orientalist literature. Indeed, it is ironic how a small yet distinguishable group—which claims to be the authentic representative of all Muslims—is unable to produce a manifesto in a clear and correct language. A manifesto full of mistakes mirrors the ignorance of the *Al-Nidaa* members of Arabic language. Hence, one might assume, it reflects their ignorance of Islam itself. On the other hand, the manifesto stands for the images that mainstream Western media used to highlight in order to sustain the different stereotypes about Muslims. Based on some specific details taken out of their cultural contexts, Western media and orientalist literature aim to draw a general picture of the Muslim World. In so doing, they seek to instill certain visual representations of Islam and Muslims into the Western collective consciousness as it best serves their agenda. Aboulela shrewdly presents the danger of one-sided story, particularly when it is

the outcome of fragmented facts. On top of that, after negating the Orientalist discourse and rendering it null and void, Aboulela plots a romantic relationship built on mutual understanding and respect between Sammar, the Sudanese Muslim, and Rae, the Scottish orientalist, to boost the cross-cultural dialogue.

## 6. *Cross-cultural Dialogue in The Translator*

By the end of the novel, Sammar and Rae reunite in Sudan to plan for their marriage. Their relation suggests the potentiality of an effective cross-cultural dialogue to take place. Unlike Yasmin who tends to see the cultural conflict in black and white, Sammar seems to be more lenient in her stance with regard to Rae and the life in Scotland. As such, Yasmin eventually moves to live in Qatar whereas Sammar makes a decision to go back to Scotland with Rae. Indeed, Rae and Sammar effectively play the role of agents of the dialogue between the West and the Orient. Rae is a typical Orientalist; he had lived in the Arab world and thus he had been exposed to Arabic and Muslim culture. Likewise, Sammar finds her shelter in Rae who seems to understand, "not in a modern, deliberately non-judgemental way but as if he was about to say, '[this] has happened to me too'" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 6). Seemingly, Rae's understanding stems not only from his sympathy but also from his cultural experiences in North Africa during the time he spent (in Morocco). Aboulela hints to the fact that the Western individual may never be able to understand other cultures unless s/he undergoes the same cultural experiences of members of these different cultures. However, an articulate communication between the two conflicting cultures is always attainable once the two sides are willing to listen, negotiate, and understand. Referring to Said's rhetoric about the alienation of the Orientalist scholar from the Orient, Aboulela's orientalist character resorts to a native informant in order to solve Said's enigma. Thus, the orientalist ultimately get the access to that which remained beyond the Occident for centuries and, thereof, such an experience alleviates the cultural conflict.

## *Conclusion:*

In the light of postcolonial concepts of resistance and cross-cultural dialogue, this paper offers a new reading of Leila Aboulela's novel *The Translator.* Therefore, building on Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Aboulela takes on her own part to sustain the literary heritage of the older generation of postcolonial writers. In *The Translator,* Aboulela reconstructs the image of Muslims so as to cut short attempts of distorting it by those who know little to nothing about Islam. Besides, the novelist reconsiders the supremacist discourse in Western academia. To this end, Edward Said's concept of Orientalism is applied in the analysis of the selected corpus as a framework to investigate the troubled relationship between the West and the Orient. Furthermore, this study sheds light on Aboulela's adaptation of English so as to suit the cultural context in which it is employed. Apart from articulating the uniqueness of cultural experience, appropriating English denotes the untranslatabilty of some aspects of culture. Accordingly, it alludes to the harmful effect of Western misinterpretation of the Islamic culture. Nevertheless, via juxtaposing the viewpoints of Rae and Sammar, the representatives of Western and Muslims' visions respectively, Aboulela invites us to reconsider the possibility of building a relationship based on mutual understanding and respect between the two poles of the conflict. In sum, the present paper aims at highlighting the shift of postcolonial writings from rigorous resistance towards a more resilient postcolonial counter-discourse.

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## *Endnotes*

**[1]** The Emergence of Anglophone Arab literature dated back to the very beginnings of the twentieth century. However, the focus of the present paper is on the postcolonial Anglophone Arab fiction. Thus, the term Anglophone Arab fiction is used in the current study to refer to the latter genre of literature, i.e. the postcolonial one. For more details on the Early and recent Anglophone Arab literature see Al Maleh, L. (2009). Arab voices in diaspora: Critical perspectives on Anglophone Arab literature. (L. Al Maleh Ed.) New York: Rodopi.

**[2]** See Huntington, S. (1996). The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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**[4]** In a similar sense, Stuart Hall argues, "[i]t is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the "positive" meaning of any term – and thus its "identity" – can be constructed." Hall, Stuart. 'Who needs "Identity"?' In Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds. Questions of Cultural Identity. Sage, 1996: 1–17. Quoted in Nash, G. (2012). Writing Muslim Identity, London: Continuum.

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**[6]** "The document was handwritten, badly photocopied and full of spelling mistakes. It was stained with tea and what she guessed to be beans mashed with oil" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 5)