

Translating Culture in Postcolonial Arab/Anglophone Women's Narratives: The Case of Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

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Abstract

Up to the twentieth century, the literature produced by Arab women writers consisted mainly of translations of the dominant Western literary works. The growing waves of intellectuals and writers in the Middle East, especially Egypt, led to the evolution of Arabic literature as a whole. Coming from the Arab roots, living in Western Europe, and using the language of the ex-colonized, immigrant writers are set to be widely recognised as Western literary canons. Migration is a central theme in much of Arab/British or American literature. From Deleuze and Guattari's perspective, narratives produced by immigrant writers are said to be considered as minor literature, and they can also stand as a subcategory of it. Such a trend of writings is insignificant when compared to mainstream tradition (like English literature), and a subset of minor literature when other new dimensions are added to, if we may say, mainstream minor literature. This later might be the case of Arab/Muslim women-immigrant literature. The present research work attempts to investigate how critical immigrant women writers such as Leila Aboulela develop narratives where they offer new models of cross-cultural encounters. In so doing, such writings have acted as mediators and interpreters between variant cultures, and they have also forged new literary identities in the writers' adopted countries.

Keywords: Arab British literature, Arab immigrant women narratives, cultural translation, translational literature, postcolonial, Leila Aboulela, *the Translator*

Cite as: KERSANI, H., & HAMZA REGUIG MOURO, W. (2020). Translating Culture in Postcolonial Arab/Anglophone Women's Narratives: The Case of Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies* 4 (1) 161-170. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol4no1.13>

Introduction

If we try to put Arab women's writings at the heart of any debate, we consciously or unconsciously rotate around the inevitable colonial and postcolonial features in defining the female brand of Arab British literature. Arab women have long been a scope of the challenge in the colonial context where women were double colonized both by male the colonizer and the colonized. They perpetuate contradictory images and fabricated representations of Arab women. Such stereotypes stimulate an ensemble of Arab women writers to write back to these misconceptions. From that time, Arab women writers sought to demonstrate reinvigorated echoes for their identities, relying on *cultural translation* in a postcolonial context. In such kind of narrative, translation is seen as an activity that reflects the world it renders by using language as a powerful tool. The aim of translation, therefore, implies communication and negotiation in the complex meeting point of cultures, ideologies, and powers. Thus, the target of this paper is how did Arab women immigrant writings highlight the view of translation as a metaphor for postcolonial Literature? In this respect, the present research paper attempts to lay the groundwork for tracing the ways these writers, Leila Aboulela in particular, followed in defining themselves as cultural translators so that to negotiate a new identity be it "Arab", "Muslim" or both, each one from her perspective, taking into consideration the influence of Orientalism on immigrant Arab writers.

Reconsidering Postcolonial Arab Immigrant Narratives via Cultural Translation

Since long ago, western translation studies has been dominated by French and English researchers, where approaches from other minorities tend to be out of the academic discussion. Translation studies also remain caught in the concept of *equivalence*, which attempts to depict the interrelations between the original and the target text and presume the unchanged identity of the message. Built on fundamental reconsideration of the positioning of 'original' and 'translation', postcolonial studies, on the contrary, assume to defeat ethnocentrism. By this, notions that characterized mainstream of translation such as equivalence/fluency, source/target, faithful/unfaithful are questioned instead.

Postcolonial studies have had some specific reflections on traditionally essentialist views of translation. Such flourishing in Translation Studies has coincided with what is known as the '*cultural turn*'. On the crossroads of postcolonial intercultural encounters, translation has become a central ingredient to the experiences of transcultural writers. Schleiermacher when offering a case of translation's confrontation with the *other* suggests that "a Foreignizing move of the readers towards the writer or a domesticating move of the writer towards the readers" (Schleiermacher, 1997, p. 230), define the established forms that govern which kind of relation should be presented of *self* and *other* in translation. For Schleiermacher, each translation situates itself somewhere between these dichotomizing views, which dominated discourses on translation (Schleiermacher, 1997, p. 230).

The concept of translation as a *metaphor* of postcolonial writings, therefore, broadens the scope of the study of translation theory and practice, including other fields like history, sociology, and so on. Wolf refers to Bhabha's (2004) effort to develop the concept of 'translational culture' as a new point of departure for the study of mass postcolonial cultural encounters. Herein, Bhabha

(2004) reveals the translation's potential to construct culture: "Culture is both transnational and translational. (...) the transnational dimension of cultural transformation-migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation- makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification" (p. 247).

Henceforth, from Bhabha's point of view, Wolf affirms that the notion of dominant cultural power is dissolved and overcome in the 'third space' or hybridity as a result of cultural translation. Postcolonial writing as translation is, to a degree, about conveying one's socio-cultural life-world through the mediation of an alien language. From this viewpoint, translation suggests communication and negotiation in the complex meeting of cultures, ideologies, and powers. Based on these assumptions, Arab immigrant women's narratives can stand as an exceptional platform for the new framework of postcolonial translation.

Cultural Translation in the Case of Arab British Literature

Arab British Literature, if compared to its counterpart, Arab American Literature, is a more recent and much smaller tradition. Arab British literature made experimental inception in the 1940s then re-emerged in the 1980s. Even so, it still portrays a small area of writers who are more recognized as 'postcolonial'. Immigration in Britain is a post-imperial feature whose people are mainly hailed from former British colonies in South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Together with this population, Arabs form a tiny minority contrasted to natives. What is meant by a country of immigrants is, perhaps, intensified within the identity of the United States, which has long been moulded by different waves of immigration. As a division, Arab British is then a subset of postcolonial whose Arab British identity is often eclipsed by such labels as 'British Muslim identity'.

As emphasized by Hassan (2012), Arab British literature is "the work of immigrants and their descendants" (p. 158). By such designation, Hassan attempts to show the work of immigrants as distinct to that of 'travellers'. Such difference goes back to that literature emerged from what Said calls 'The-Anglo Arab Encounter'. This latter, as Hassan (2012) thinks, referred to those narratives carried out by travellers rather than immigrants in Britain. Said (1979) used the term 'Anglo-Arab Encounter' in a review of Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, where he sets the occasion to complain of the famine number of English-language novels written by Arabs.

Along with travellers, entities like 'East' and 'West' remain intact in whose case the 'encounter' remains between cultures that are presumptively detached and discrete (Said, 1979), simply because those travellers are not native informants, i.e., Arabs. Instead, they are scholars who travel to study the East. This view, together with 'Arab British', however, is opposed indicating an identity that is fused and hybrid. Arab immigrant literature then confirms Said's idea of the self as "a cluster of flowing currents" rather than "a solid self" (1995, p. 295), and the notion that no one is purely one thing" (Said, 1995, p. 336). Unlike travellers, immigrants' experience is one of cultural admixture and interpenetration.

Nevertheless, this is not always the case with the whole ensemble of Arab immigrant writers. Many of those writers have demonstrated tendencies of complicity within the complex matrix of cultural, ideological, religious, and political forces that shaped their narratives in the early twentieth century (Hassan 2012). In doing so, added to their position as cultural translators for the homeland and the adopted one, they supply the process (cultural translation) with extra dimensions to challenge hegemonic Western and Orientalist discourses, however they are always defined and co-defined by such dominant frames.

Basic Traits of Arab British Literature

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1986, p. 16), the immigrant narrative is minor literature, and it can also be presented as a subcategory of minor literature. It is minor when compared to mainstream tradition (like English literature), and a subset of minor literature when other new dimensions are added to, if may say mainstream minor literature. Minor literature “does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p. 16). In other words, by adopting English (major language), immigrants form a distinctive brand of literature.

Even though writing in a foreign language is what seems typical to this tradition, other considerations have arisen. Such literature has three characteristics: “the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p.18). Indeed, a major language, along with a minority writer’s ways of expressing ideas, ideological intentions, and representing his/her minority group, first demonstrates that language (English) in an unfamiliar manner, and second distinguishes the writer from the mainstream culture.

The second trait refers to the fact that because of the marginal status of minor literature, “everything in them is political” where “the cramped space” of such literary tradition “forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story [that of the minority group] is vibrating within it” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p.17). The third characteristic is perhaps the most addressed one in this research paper. In addition, it refers to the basis that “in it [minor literature] everything takes on a collective value” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p.1) of belonging to the minority band of Arab British/American.

In Hassan’s (2012) view, however, these characteristics do not always fully exist in Arab immigrant texts. To illustrate that, Hassan claims that “the fact that many writers accepted the basic tenets of Orientalism has had different consequences” (p.6). On the one hand, some writers valorise the East/West dichotomy and the notion of Oriental inferiority that leads to a distance from the homeland. They even “refuse to be seen as representatives of an Arab American collectivity, embracing instead the collectivity of the American majority or the ideology of individualism” (Hassan, 2012, p. 6). On the other hand, some reject Orientalism, and this happens in different ways. Some immigrant writers, despite that they reject Orientalism; they prefer not to be reactive and restore to the form of literary silence. Others refuse the Oriental inferiority more

assertively by identifying with and defending an immigrant Arab combination. While some reject the Orientalist dichotomy altogether, other writers embrace the representational burden of the second and third features of minor literature.

The Impact of Translation in Modelling Identities among Arab Immigrant Writers

Taking English as the primary means of writing, few Arab immigrant writers have set themselves both as cultural translators of 'Orient' to 'Occident', and as interpreters of 'Occident' together to itself and to the 'Orient'. Orientalist scholars already initiated half of the tradition. In this respect, Said (1979) asserts that "the relationship between Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical" (p.222).

Said's first intention here is his claim of the Orientalists' position as that of translators. Throughout the device of English language, Arab immigrant writers, like Orientalists, found themselves often expected to interpret their culture for their readers. However, since Orientalists' representation of the 'Orient' is based on theoretical assumptions and far reflections, Said described their Orient portrayals as one-sided translators. Henceforth, unlike European or American Orientalists, Arab Immigrant writers neither stand outside the 'Orient' nor the 'Occident'. The reason initially goes back to the writers' attitudes of belonging to the 'Orient' by their mainstream social and cultural heritage. Simultaneously, they are part of the 'Occident' because of migration and acculturation.

Leaning against this premise, Hassan depicts Arab immigrant writers as "two-way translators" who accordingly espouse the Orientalist tradition as a portion of their narratives, when he (2012) writes:

Arab immigrant writers have adopted translational stances that range from native informants to Orientalist (...), from reluctant translators who struggle with the burden of collective representation to those who eagerly embrace the role; and from opportunists who exploit it to activists who turn it into a site of contestation and opposition. (p. 29)

Differently said, while trying to represent or translate the 'Orient', many Arab immigrant writers themselves fall in the trick of the hegemonic discourse of Orientalism. Writing in English has long been considered as a translational task that is invested in discussions of cultural identity. Hassan (2012) further indicates that "Orientalism is the reigning episteme within which this literature is produced and that cultural translation is its mode of being" (p. 7).

Therefore, translation theory has itself struggled with the politics, ethics, and epistemology of cultural-linguistic transfer in ways that help enlighten the tradition of Arab American and Arab British literature. As Venuti (1998) asserts, "the formation of cultural identities" is "by far the most consequential [...] and the greatest potential source of scandal" of all the effects of translation, because translation "wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures" (p. 67). Since translation can:

Fix stereotypes for foreign cultures, excluding values, debates, and conflicts that don't appear to serve domestic agendas. In creating stereotypes, translation may attach esteem or stigma to specific ethnic, racial, and national groupings, signifying respect for cultural difference or hatred (Venuti, 1998, pp. 67-68)

That is to say, translation is an essential device for identity construction, yet most of the time in an exclusive shocking way. Therefore, different types of identities have been constructed and reconstructed by Arab immigrant women writers. Among them, one can count, transgressive, hybrid, or to some extent, authentic. These assumptions lead to a new brand of postcolonial literature, as named by Hassan (2012) *Translational Literature*.

Translational Literature

As being derived from both an Arab and immigrant background, translational writing shares different aspects with its main Arab immigrant literary stream. However, since it has its focus and field of interest in both form and strategy, it takes away a distinct translational literary path that is together exclusive and challenging. Hassan comes back to this point when he asserts that “transnational literature” does not represent all immigrant writings, but “strictly speaking, those texts that straddle two languages, at once foregrounding, performing, problematizing the act of translation” (Hassan, 2012, p. 32). The process of *Translation*, with its cultural aspect, is then what marks the distinctive signature of *Translational Literature*. As a common point of reference with Arab immigrant literature, such narratives participate in the construction of cross-cultural identities. Yet, because the processes of translation exhibits as the prominent theme along with the paradigmatic and ideological positions, those texts “draw a benchmark for the most contestatory kinds of cultural translation” to become “the most radical form” in immigrant Arabic literature (Hassan, 2012, p. 32).

Reflecting on different sides, translational literature is a form of cultural and political activity shaping both its production and reception, as Hassan (2012) puts it:

Translational literature exposes the problematics of translation as an interpretive process in its attempt to negotiate the complex critical, institutional, and commercial grids that govern the selection, translation, publication, and marketing of Arabic texts in Britain and the U.S. More crucially, translational texts are positioned to resist the power differentials that influence the work of the translator and reproduce stereotyped cultural identities. In performing acts of cultural translation in the ‘original’ itself, translational literature at once problematizes the notion of the ‘original’ and stages what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the deterritorialization of language. (p. 33)

In other words, translational literature seems to be more provocative because it dares to highlight some new issues that did not use to serve domestic literary canon. Translational literature, if may say, is at once transgressive and submissive: first, it has to show its resistance to fixed dichotomies as ‘East’ vs. ‘West’, where it also should affirm some of the already established stereotypes. Second, along with its national cultural, ideological, and paradigmatic affiliation, it then modifies

that ‘original’ to be no more ‘original’. It, thus, adopts then adapts the ‘original’; for instance, such narratives may “Arabize”, “Africanize”, or “Indianize” English (Hassan 2012).

Sometimes by translating words or expressions for which there is no English equivalent, these narratives also attempt to explain the rhetoricity of the mother-tongue language, transferring not only sense but also such cultural-linguistic phenomena like idiomatic, proverbial, and even religious (such as Quran and Hadith) usage equipped by culturally embedded connotations.

Therefore, translational literature seeks to convey or transfer the cultural property of its language (in this case, Arabic) at the expense of fluency and immediate intelligibility. This way, such a new brand of literature is directed toward a complicated mode of translation, probably supporting what Douglas Robinson calls “radical literalism” (Robinson, 1996, p. xi), or the kind of texts that allude to the limits of translatability; entering the space of the ‘Untranslatability’. Untranslatability is, however, one of the characteristics that recently shaped some of its writings (like that of Aboulela). In this context, “untranslatability” is, instead, taken as a scheme or strategy than a drawback.

Spivak (1993) affirms the idea when she argues that while the rhetoric of any language at times interrupts its logic, it is in the “jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic, condition and effect of knowing” that

A world is made for the agent, so that the agent can act in an ethical way, a political way; so that the agent can be alive, in a human way, in the world. Unless one can at least construct a model of this for the other language, there is no real translation (Spivak, 1993, p. 181).

This, then, reveals that translational literature takes translation as its landmark. In doing so, it problematizes the ground by its inclusion of a native cultural ingredient that leads to the untranslatable.

Translation in Aboulela’s Ideology

Among the best examples that fit the case of “translational literature” is the novel of *The Translator*, written by the Sudanese British woman writer Leila Aboulela. The postcolonial, translational, and bilingual writer is, like the *translator*, a mediator by using her freedom to move ‘back’ and ‘forth’ between the cultures she intends to represent. As Tymoczko (2003) observes, the in-between space has become “one of the most popular means of figuring an *elsewhere* that a translator may speak from” (p. 185). Such a position of movement and mediation has then turned to a frequently used literary tool in the postcolonial cultural transfer from one place to another.

Indeed, the novel is about “the possibilities and limits of translation as an avenue to cultural communication” (Hassan, 2012, p. 187), Hassan suggests, covering both its linguistic and cultural sides. Aboulela admits that the process of translation is far from being straightforward (or straight back and forth) as cultural values do not travel easily, particularly between major and minor

cultures. Within the same frame, Aboulela (2002) opposes the conventional notion of fluency and equivalence between the text in the source language and the target one, when she writes: “This is like this here but not there”. High value, or what was referred to in chapter one as ‘rhetoricity of language’ is transformed into “nothing” in its new socio-cultural context (pp. 1-200).

Despite the writer’s obvious intention for translation, several parts denoting this process; on the contrary, demonstrate the impossibility of full mutual intelligibility and understanding. This role is held by the main character Sammar who is aware enough of how much interpretation can affect others, especially when the culture is alien to the addressee. For instance, when Sammar was about to translate a manifesto produced by a radical group in Southern Egypt called *Al-Nidaa*, remarks:

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. Last night she had stayed up late transforming Arabic rhetoric into English, imagining she could smell beans cooked in the way she had known long ago, with cumin and olive oil, all the time trying not to think too much about the meaning next day, not to make a big thing out of it. (Aboulela, 1999, pp. 5-6)

Sammar is conscious that the document is full of cultural ingredients that are difficult to be rendered to an alien culture because of both cultural and linguistic incompatibility. Beyond the flooding emphasis on untranslatability, the novel, on the other hand, adopts an exclusive variable of translation by which devout-immigrant Muslim struggles with her love for a non-Muslim man. In *The Translator*, Aboulela employs the conversion of her character, Rae, to Islam as a new brand in postcolonial translation studies. Within the Islamic device, the writer plays both on the translatable and on the untranslatable, where this later, following her stance of translation itself, leads to the translatable by the end of the novel.

Rae’s conversion is, arguably, a form of cultural translation in the original sense of *translation*, derived from the Latin *translation*: ‘carrying across’. As Tymoczko (2003) recalls, the word was initially used “in the very concrete sense of moving things to space” and “its meaning was extended relatively late in time, during the fourteen century, and applied to the activity inter-lingual translation in English” (p.189). Significantly, the link between translation and sacred texts in western culture plays a crucial role in its creation and spread. The development of Christianity, in particular, is associated with translation: from the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek and St Jerome’s translation of the New Testament into Latin (Munday, 2009). Therefore, it is throughout this emphasis on untranslatability, hailed by Sammar and Rae’s explanations, that Aboulela works to establish the framework for a discourse of translation that is developed in the novel as an alternative to traditional Western theories of translation.

Thus, Aboulela, addressing the reader in a western language, employing the rhetoric of translation in her work and referring to her role as a translator, undermines the culturally conditioned expectations these terms raise. The norms of hegemonic translation, which Aboulela

challenges, grow out of western religious and philosophical traditions. What Aboulela did might then be read as what Hassan has ascribed it to be a “reverse-Eurocentrism”. Yet, this does not mean that Aboulela is attempting to convert her readers. Instead, she is making an argument against the translation and domestication of Muslims into a western value system. Aboulela by deconstructing the norms of cultural translation, particularly by rejecting one of its overriding motifs: hybridity and in-betweenness, in addition to the way that Islam occupies the center of the novel; it seems challenging to contextualize *The Translator* with a postcolonial tradition. In spite of that, we claim that Aboulela, in a way or another, is a postcolonial writer by virtue of adopting a western language and using the device of translation that is indeed a postcolonial troop.

Conclusion

Located in the linguistic and cultural gaps that emerge from the interaction of various cultures and languages, the narratives of Arab immigrant women writers, particularly in the postcolonial sphere, is an emerging area where these meetings have taken their own voice. Their efforts to revise and rewrite identities that have been previously hidden, censored or stereotyped by discourses prompted from the centre; might be considered as a type of ‘translation’. Thereby, this sort of fiction stands as an instance of the possibility of cross-cultural communication, the ability to overcome rooted differences, and the need for translatability between major and minor cultures.

In post-colonial settings, the power differential has often determined how alien cultural forms and concept practices are translated via a process of familiarization to the target culture (Dingwaney, 1995, p. 4-5). Therefore, Arab immigrant writers have either to assimilate to the mainstream culture of their adoptive countries, or recast the Orientalist prevailing images on their own home. In such narratives, writers have either to resist, challenge or perpetuate the orientalist scholarship and the process of stereotyping Arab/Muslim women. Contemporary Arab women’s writings attempt is set to demonstrate how such representations can be reconciliatory (as it is the case with Aboulela’s *The Translator*), and ambivalent or counteractive as shown by the novels of Ahdaf Soueif for example.

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