**Back Home: Translation, Conversion and Domestication in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator***

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**Abstract**

The Sudanese-born author Leila Aboulela describes the position of the non-western Anglophone writer as a translator by default, moving ‘back and forth’ between languages and cultures. This essay argues that Aboulela’s novel *The Translator* (1999) calls into question conceptualizations of translation that grow out of western religious and philosophical traditions. The central metaphor of translation seems paradoxical: the only successful act of translation in the novel is a religious conversion into Islam, and is linked with the untranslatability of the core of Islam itself. The essay shows how this process, the rewriting of a secular westerner into Islamic faith, problematizes and reworks notions of equivalence, transparency, invisibility and domestication dominant in Anglo-American models of translation. Moreover, when *The Translator* is considered in relation to Aboulela’s other works, the popular representation of the translator as a neutral cultural mediator is subverted: this author-translator’s task is not to facilitate bi-lateral cultural exchange, but to act as an ideological agent of cultural change. Her works translate Islam for the western reader while making an argument against the translation of Muslims into a western value system. Thus Aboulela, addressing the reader in English, employing the rhetoric of translation in her work, and referring to her own role as translator, undermines the culturally conditioned expectations these terms raise and challenges western paradigms of translation.

**Keywords**

Leila Aboulela, translation**,** Islam, untranslatability, religious conversion.

In an essay about the autobiographical aspects of her work, Sudanese-born Leila Aboulela comments on her position as a non-western Anglophone writer: ‘Write in a western language, publish in the west and you are constantly translating, back and forth — this is like this here but not there. A thing has high value here, a certain weight, move it to another place and it becomes nothing’ (Aboulela 2002: 200-1).

The first part of this statement suggests that the transnational, postcolonial, and bilingual writer is, like the translator, a mediator, using her freedom to move ‘back and forth’ to promote understanding between the cultures she straddles. This imagery of movement and mediation places the translator in a space between two languages and cultures. The formulation of translation more generally as a so-called space between is common, and as Maria Tymoczko observes, it has become ‘one of the most popular means of figuring an *elsewhere* that a translator may speak from’ — an elsewhere ‘that *ipso facto* affords the translator a valorized ideological stance’ (Tymoczko 2003: 185). As Tymoczko shows in her analysis, this discourse grows out of historical and linguistic practices that are specifically western: she traces these back to the Latin origin of the word *translation*, with its literal meaning of carrying across and its later metaphorical extension by Bible translators. The seemingly universal conceptualization of translation as a space between, then, is grounded in a western view of the translation process, one that ‘is not easily transferable to other cultural systems’ (Tymoczko, 2003: 198). Thus, the postcolonial author-translator, aiming here to articulate her position as other than western, is still inscribed in a paradigm with an inherent western bias.

Moreover, it is tempting to associate this in-betweenness of the translator with neutrality; it is, as Tymoczko argues, a metaphor that romanticizes the translator and isolates her from her ‘cultural framework or agenda’ (Tymoczko, 2003: 199). Yet, as the second part of Aboulela’s statement about her position reveals, the process of translation is far from straightforward (or straight back and forth): cultural values do not travel easily, especially between cultures perceived as dominant and dominated, major and minor. Aboulela challenges the conventional notion of equivalence between the text in the source language and in the target language: ‘this is like this here but not here*’*; high value is transformed into ‘nothing’in its new context (Aboulela 2002: 200-1). Rather than indicating simply that equivalence is impossible, I suggest that Aboulela ultimately rejects it as a gauge for her brand of translation. She does not make a claim for detachment or neutrality, and is clearly implicated in a cultural and ideological agenda. She declares that she wishes to show Anglo--American readers that Sudan is ‘a valid place, a valid way of life beyond the stereotypical images of famine and war’ (Aboulela 2002: 204). Indeed, much of Aboulela’s fiction — the novels *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) and the collection of stories, *Coloured Lights* (2001) — is concerned with the experiences of Sudanese immigrants to the UK and the lives of Muslims in the west more generally: with the many big and small culture shocks involved in living on a cold, wet island, in a western, secular society. Several of the works stage a movement back and forth between Sudan and the United Kingdom; this movement is not only geographic, but between two ways of life, and the concern that seems to drive these works, even more than the equitable depiction of Sudan, is the representation of Islam as a form of personal salvation and empowerment, and by extension as a desirable cultural alternative to western secularism and its concomitant values of liberty and humanism, which are shown as empty rhetoric.

*The Translator,* Aboulela’s first novel and the focus of this essay, highlights the difficulty of moving and mediating between the two worlds inhabited by the migrant-translator protagonist and, by extension, by the bicultural translator-author. It is the story of Sammar, a Sudanese widow trapped in a life of alienation in Aberdeen, and of her emergence from the crisis caused by her husband’s death as she finds new love: a love that needs to overcome significant cultural barriers. Sammar works as a translator for Rae, a historian specializing in the Middle East and Islam. Their work leads to an intimacy and love that is frustrated by Rae’s secularism: Sammar, as a devout Muslim, cannot marry a non-Muslim. The understated love story has a happy ending: Rae converts to Islam, and he and Sammar can live happily ever after.

The narrative, then, is concerned with translation on two levels. In her professional capacity, Sammar repeatedly encounters the difficulty, and at times the impossibility, of adequately translating political and cultural texts. In a metaphorical sense, Rae’s conversion into Islam is presented as a different type of translation. Waïl Hassan (2008) and Nadia Butt (2009) have shown that this transformation is linked with the untranslatability of Islam itself, creating what seems to be a paradox: a novel that appears to put translation at its centre, but at the same time to reject the possibility of translation. Both critics underscore the movement in *The Translator* away from a western idea (or ideal) of multiculturalism, of an equalizing of the cultural exchange between the west and its other by a movement ‘back and forth’, as Aboulela would have it. Aboulela, they show, rejects hybridization and withdraws into an Islamic ideology of singleness and separation. Hassan sees Aboulela’s wider literary project as a ‘reverse-Eurocentrism’ that is conservative and regressive, rejecting existential freedom and political responsibility in favour of a ‘fiction of authenticity’ (Hassan 2008: 316).

While my conclusions are similar to Hassan’s, I will focus here on the metaphor of translation developed in the novel and its relationship to Aboulela’s perception of her own role as a cultural translator. I will examine how the public-sphere role of the translator as mediator is contrasted in the novel with the private crisis of the woman-migrant. I will also show that Rae’s conversion — perhaps the single successful act of translation in the novel — is revealed as a rewriting, by a divine translator, of western liberal secularism into Islamic faith. Nevertheless, I will argue that this process, rather than exposing the impossibility of translation, challenges and reworks notions of transparency, invisibility and domestication dominant in Anglo--American models of translation. When *The Translator* is considered in relation to Aboulela’s other works, the role of this author-translator can be articulated more accurately not in terms of mediation and facilitation of bi-lateral cultural exchange, but as a fully ideological agent of cultural change.

Movement back and forth between the United Kingdom and Sudan structures *The Translator* and defines Sammar’s identity. The novel begins in Scotland, a site of isolation for Sammar, four years after her husband’s death. The second half of the novel takes place in Khartoum. But the movement between the two worlds begins much earlier, and in fact Sammar makes three trips from the United Kingdom to Sudan and three trips in the opposite direction. Born in Britain, Sammar did not arrive in Sudan, or ‘home’, as she refers to it, until she was seven:

‘‘Not until I was seven.” These were her words, the word “until” as if she could not reconcile herself to those first seven years of life without [Tarig]. In better times she used to reinvent the beginnings of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan. (Aboulela 1999: 4)

Already at this stage, ‘home’ is linked not only to a geographic location, but to her future husband, Tarig. It is with him that Sammar travels to the United Kingdom for the first time as an adult. After Tarig is killed in an accident, Sammar makes the second journey to Sudan, bringing back his coffin and their small child Amir; she returns to Scotland alone. All these journeys occur in the narrative as memories. *The Translator*, then, is a novel about migration, but the real crisis of the novel is not the loss or lack of a homeland. The loss is, so to speak, much closer to home: the devastating breakdown of family life and a crisis of domesticity. After Tarig’s death, Sammar, in her distress, leaves her son, Amir, with his paternal grandmother in Sudan: the child, she admits, ‘was not the focus of her life, not the centre where once his father had been’ (Aboulela 1999: 100).

 Sammar’s existence in Aberdeen is marked by discontinuity. She reflects on her expectations from life: ‘simple, nothing grand, just to continue and live in the same place, … have babies, grow fat…. But continuity, it seemed, was in itself ambitious’ (Aboulela 1999: 23). The family life she had envisioned for herself in Sudan is replaced by a lonely existence in her bare room in Scotland. A gap opens between ‘here’ and ‘there’, between the desolate ‘alien British cold’ of her present and the sunny promise of her past (Aboulela 1999: 57).

Things start to change once Sammar begins to work for Rae, a ‘Middle-Eastern historian and a lecturer in Third World Politics’ (Aboulela 1999: 5). Rae, who had ‘lived in her part of the world’ and looks ‘like he could easily pass for a Turk or a Persian’ (5), researches political Islam, and is often accused by colleagues and the wider public — due to his media appearances as a commentator on current events — of being too liberal. He maintains, for instance, that the extremist groups he is researching are ‘protest movements, and they do have plenty to protest about’ (25). Sammar translates historical and political texts for him, such as the manifesto of a radical Islamist group, *Al-Nidaa*:

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 the 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 to not make a big thing out of it. (Aboulela 1999: 5)

Waïl Hassan sees this passage as indicative of the limits of translation. He notes the ‘extra-linguistic but highly significant semiotic elements’ that will not be conveyed in Sammar’s translation: the poor physical quality of the texts, the fact they are handwritten, badly photocopied, full of mistakes, and stained (Hassan 2008: 305). These signs reveal the conditions of the production of the text, the amateurish nature of the organization in question, and they lead Sammar to comment to Rae that she finds the texts sad and ‘pathetic’ (Aboulela 1999: 24). These characteristics, ‘laden with cultural associations’, cannot be rendered in another language, Hassan observes (Hassan 2008: 305). Interestingly, Hassan also maintains that ‘rhetorical aspects’ that are ‘language-bound’ are ‘impossible to translate’ (305). This seems to leave very little that can be translated, and I would suggest that rather than the limitations of translation as such — though these are undeniable — this passage underscores the position of this particular translator, and her valuation of the private over the public sphere, which is a defining feature of Aboulela’s ideological project in her fiction.

Hassan asserts that the *Al-Nidaa* text is translatable ‘only at the risk of radical “transformation” that will likely be caught up in the rhetoric while obscuring the non-verbal signs that undercut it — contradictions that render the whole document “pathetic” rather than threatening’ (Hassan 2008: 305). It would seem that what is lost here is not what Eugene Nida calls formal equivalence, which ‘focuses attention on the message itself’ — in this case, the text of the manifesto — ‘in both form and content’, but rather ‘dynamic equivalence’, which ‘is based upon “the principle of equivalent effect”’ and aims to replicate the effect of the message on the original receiver, creating the same relationship in the target language (Nida 1964: 159). What cannot be conveyed to Rae is the emotional reaction evoked in Sammar by the non-linguistic elements of the manifesto. Significantly, the reader has no access to the manifesto itself, and the narrative shifts the core of meaning from the political message to the extra-textual elements, to the domestic dimension added to the text accidentally: the stains that Sammar reads as ‘beans mashed with oil’ — a semiotic sign that evokes, in an almost Proustian manner, a familiar smell and the memory of food cooked ‘long ago’. Arguably, these extra-textual elements would not have had the same impact on the intended readership of the manifesto: the desired effect of a manifesto, by its very nature, is to inspire political commitment and action. Aboulela’s text, then, not only refuses to be ‘caught up in the rhetoric’ of Islamic militancy of groups such as *Al-Nidaa*. Rather than undercutting it, the emphasis on the domestic, non-verbal signs obscure the rhetoric altogether. This is in keeping with the vision of Islam Aboulela puts forward here and in other works, as a matter of private faith rather than a force involved in global politics.

Indeed, the political and the public are repeatedly elided in the novel in favour of the private and domestic. Rae’s work entails an engagement with current affairs and an intervention in the public sphere. He studied Islam not for its spiritual value, but to better understand the politics of the Middle East: ‘In the middle of all the prejudice and hypocrisy,’ he tells Sammar, ‘I wanted to be one of the few who was saying what was reasonable and right’ (Aboulela 1999: 114). Sammar, on the other hand, is detached from the public or social aspect of her work. On her way to Khartoum, thinking her relationship with Rae has ended after he has refused to convert to Islam, Sammar works as an interpreter for an anti-terrorism program in Cairo. Rae sees these programmes as ‘part of a hype to cover up the real problems of unemployment and inefficient government’ (Aboulela 1999: 25), but arranges the job for Sammar because he thinks she will be glad to take the opportunity to visit her family. Sammar seems oblivious to the political aspects of the job. Preoccupied with the loss, yet again, of the prospect of domestic bliss, her work becomes perfunctory: ‘she worked hard pushing Arabic into English, English into Arabic’ (Aboulela 1999: 143). There is no creative quality to the work of translation: it is not a careful transformation of utterances, and the words are mechanically, almost violently pushed from one language to the other. And if Sammar was unimpressed with the *Al Nidaa* manifesto, here she is completely disengaged: she is interviewing suspected extremists, and when one of them criticizes the west — ‘“Western men worship money and women,”’ he says — ‘she remained numb, numb about everything…. She remained numb until she reached Khartoum, walked into her aunt’s house and saw Tarig’s picture on the wall’ (Aboulela 1999: 143).

The move to Sudan ends Sammar’s professional engagement in translation and makes way for the more significant act of translation in the novel: Rae’s conversion to Islam. Rae — as Sammar learns early on — is annoyed when confronted with Muslims’ expectation that he convert. He tells Sammar of the repeated attempts by his Muslim colleague to persuade him to convert. ‘“Every once in a while,”’ Rae says, ‘“he would suddenly have this outburst. Why I haven’t accepted Islam, how I can study it, know it and still not see that *it is the truth*…?”’ (Aboulela 1999: 78). The notion of Islam as truth is closely linked with the idea of its untranslatability and with the belief that the Qur’an, in Arabic, is the word of God revealed. As Daniel Brown explains, the ‘divine word is uncreated, eternally existing with God, and this same eternal, uncreated Word is manifested on earth in the form of a book.… Thus the words of the Qur’an qualify as what scholars of religion could call a theophany — the closest the believer can come to direct encounter with God’ (Brown 2009: 79—80). As the word of God, the Qur’an is ‘perfect and eternal’ (Brown 2009: 80).

The idea of the Qur’an as the word of God himself is expressed more than once in the novel. It first occurs in a discussion of the translation of the Islamic hadith, prophetic traditions that constitute the ‘building blocks of traditional Islamic learning’ (Brown 2009: 89). Sammar reads her notes on the distinction between the hadith and the Qur’an to Rae:

“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 1999: 36—37)

Rae, whose knowledge of Islam is underscored repeatedly in the novel, would naturally be familiar with this distinction. The explanation is, in fact, aimed at the non-Muslim or the non-expert western reader: as Hassan notes, Aboulela’s works undertake to explain Islamic theology and rituals to a readership that has no access to this tradition in its original language (Hassan 2008: 310). Aboulela, through Sammar, thus acts as a translator for this reader. But she does not only translate Islamic faith or expound on it: she also begins to establish the framework for a discourse of translation that is developed in the novel as an alternative to traditional western theories of translation.

The hadith is a translation of sorts: the meaning, created by Allah, is translated by his prophet for the faithful. As a translation, it is not characterized, Sammar reads on, ‘“by the attribute of inimitability”’ (37). The Qur’an, by contrast, is the word of God revealed, unchanged by any intermediaries. The idea that Arabic is the language of revelation is, as Nadia Butt points out, maintained in the religious practice of reading the Qur’an exclusively in Arabic, a practice carried out by hundreds of millions of non-Arabic speakers ‘so that they do not miss anything in God’s words which a translation is likely to miss’ (Butt 2009: 175).

The Qur’an has, of course, been translated, but, Rae concedes, translations ‘don’t do it justice. Much is lost…’. ‘Yes,’ Sammar responds, ‘the meaning can be translated but not reproduced. And of course the miracle of it can’t be reproduced.’ (Aboulela 1999: 112). This is the core of Islam, Sammar tells Rae: ‘Everything in my religion comes from this’ (112). Butt maintains that this insistence on the untranslatability of Islam renders ironic the ‘leitmotif and running metaphor of “the translator”, because in reality no cultural translation takes place. Instead, a secular man from Europe becomes a Muslim in order to marry a Muslim woman and to rise in Allah’s favour’ (Butt 2009: 170). Yet Rae’s transformation is, arguably, a form of cultural translation, in the original sense of the word *translation*, derived from the Latin *translatio*: ‘carrying across’. As Maria Tymoczko reminds us, the word was initially used ‘in the very concrete sense of moving things through space’ and ‘its meaning was extended relatively late in time, during the fourteenth century, and applied to the activity of interlingual translation in English’ (Tymoczko 2003: 189). Significantly, this usage ‘was pioneered by Bible translators in what seems to be a metaphoric extension of more central semantic meanings of the word’ (Tymoczko 2003: 189).

The link between translation and sacred texts in western culture is worth bearing in mind when considering the way the metaphor of conversion as translation is employed and problematized in Aboulela’s novel. Translation plays a key role in the creation and spread of western culture. The development of Christianity in particular is closely associated with processes of translation: from the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek and St Jerome’s translation of the New Testament into Latin (Munday 2009: 2-3), through the Reformation movement that rendered the Bible in vernacular European languages (Tymczko 2003:190) to the close relationship between Christian mission and the project of colonization (Hock 2006). The earliest translation of the Qur’an into a western language was also carried out in the service of Christian expansion: the project was undertaken by Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, in the twelfth century, after the First Crusade. His intention, Ziad Elmarsafy explains, was to ‘convert Muslims rather than exterminate them, and one means of doing so would be to study Islam the better to be able to refute it’ (Elmarsafy 2009: 1). This, Elmarsafy adds, ‘was to become a standard part of Christian anti-Muslim polemical and apologetic literature’ (Elmarsafy 2009: 1). Against this history of translation and western colonialism, and specifically translation in the service of religious conversion, Aboulela offers a counter-narrative of religious conversion that, while metaphorically linked with translation, underscores the limits of human translation and challenges theories of translation that grow out of western traditions.

The core of Islam is untranslatable; as the absolute truth and the miracle that Sammar, following Muslim orthodoxy, professes it to be, it transcends cultural systems and does not require translation. Nevertheless, non-believers can be converted, translated into Islam and thereby into Islamic, non-Western culture more widely. In fact, the formal act of conversion is linguistic: it consists of a recitation of the *shahadah*, the declaration of faith in God and Muhammad his messenger. It is this speech act that Sammar, in her desperate wish to become Rae’s wife, tries to persuade Rae to perform:

“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 1999: 115)

This is Sammar’s moment of utter failure as a translator: in her focus on form — on the words alone — she disregards the meaning attached to them. It is their meaning — the fact that they express faith — that gives them their transformative power. Moreover, Sammar fails because she conceives of this translational act in terms of ‘here’ — of Aberdeen, of the west, where such empty gestures are not uncommon — rather than of the culture that is the target of this translation. These ‘here’ and ‘there’ can be described in linguistic terms as English and Arabic, the two languages between which Sammar moves, but in Aboulela’s metaphor of conversion as translation, these languages point to a wider cultural identity and identification. If English is increasingly seen as the global language of the west, Arabic, the language of Islam, stands for Muslim culture more generally.

Rae’s successful conversion occurs only when Sammar withdraws, returns to Sudan, and 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 1999: 160)

It would appear that the conversion is an instance of what Hassan calls divine — as opposed to human — translation. According to Hassan, human translation, which includes linguistic and cultural transfer, involves ‘constant movement back and forth between source and target languages’ and is always ‘historical, situated, and ever incomplete’ (Hassan 2008: 308). Divine translation, by contrast, ‘negates human agency, interrupts history and supersedes all worldly affiliations — the very definition of miracle’ (308). It is this divine translation process that is at the heart of *The Translator*: human translation of the kind Sammar engages in is shown as limited, imperfect, and of no real significance or interest to Sammar herself. Rae’s translation into Islam is the only instance of a truly successful translation in the novel, and it is, in fact, presented as a miracle. He tells Sammar:

“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 1999:180)

Indeed, Rae is not brought to Islam by any agency he recognizes as his own (the search for knowledge that had characterized him was clearly not the path to faith), and not even Sammar’s influence seems to have been instrumental in what he calls his spiritual path. ‘When you left,’ he tells her, ‘I thought if this isn’t enough incentive for me to convert nothing is.’ (Aboulela 1999: 180). Significantly, it is not Sammar’s loss that brings Rae to discover the power of faith, but a much more fundamental need. He describes the moment of revelation, during one of the asthma attacks that plagued him quite regularly: ‘Sucking air that would not go in, not go inside. In this helpless state, in this humiliation, the need to pray’ (Aboulela 1999: 180). Religious faith is nothing less than a life force, and only God has the power to bring about such a profound transformation.

In a sense, this divine translation can be seen as the ultimate example of a transparent translation achieved by an invisible translator. Transparency, Lawrence Venuti argues, is ‘the authoritative discourse for translating,’ especially in the Anglo--American world (Venuti 1995: 6). ‘The illusion of transparency,’ Venuti explains, ‘is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator’s effort to insure easy readability.… The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and presumably the more visible the writer or the meaning of the foreign text’ (Venuti 1995: 1-2). This ideal of transparency reflects a ‘hierarchy of cultural practices’ that values the original over the translation (Venuti 1992: 3). The original is seen to express the author’s personality or intention; the translation, on the other hand, ‘can be no more than … a copy, derivative’ (Ventui 1992:3). This western view of the creative process, with its emphasis on individuality, is at odds with an Islamic discourse that stresses humility and submission in the face of God. Indeed, the product of divine translation does not resemble the original: the very essence of the original, Rae’s secularism — he had insisted that it was ‘not in [him] to be religious’ (Aboulela 1999: 113) — has been eradicated and replaced with faith. This is an unfaithful translation that might more accurately be described as a rewriting through faith.

But what of the human translator in the novel? I suggest that Rae’s conversion, though a miracle, is also represented subtly as an act of translation — in the sense of carrying across — through faith: through Sammar’s faith. Sammar’s contribution consists of self-effacement, of assuming the invisibility required of the successful translator, ‘trying to be transparent like a pane of glass,’ as she reflects nostalgically about her old job (Aboulela 1999: 150). After realizing that Rae’s conversion must happen for his own sake, Sammar prays for him, and as she does this, she experiences ‘an awareness [of Rae] that would suddenly come and stay with her.’ And ‘the more she prayed for him, the more these moments came until they were there all the time, not only thoughts, not only memories but an awareness that stayed’ (Aboulela 1999: 165). Shortly afterwards, the convert Rae materializes at her aunt’s home in Khartoum, ready to marry her and take her and Amir back with him to the United Kingdom. A miracle, yes, but one that Sammar, significantly, feels she has had a special part in, as her reaction to the news of the conversion shows: ‘The rush of this new knowledge, the feeling of being lifted up. … For she was being honoured now, she was being rewarded. All alone, a miracle for no one else to acknowledge but her’ (Aboulela 1999: 170--71).

Rae’s conversion into Islam, then, involves two transparent processes of translation: the primary, divine translation performed by the ultimate invisible translator, and the secondary, human process of Sammar’s self-effacement and expression of faith. Sammar’s withdrawal or invisibility does not occasion Rae’s rewriting as a faithful Muslim, but it contributes indirectly to the miraculous transformation. A transparent translation, Venuti notes, ‘performs a labor of acculturation which domesticates the foreign text’ (Venuti 1992: 5). This observation takes on a particular significance in the context of Aboulela’s novel. Rae’s conversion, his domestication into Islam by divine translation, also brings about the resolution of the domestic crisis that has haunted Sammar. She can lay Tarig’s ghost to rest and start a new life with a new husband. Moreover, the conversion signals, paradoxically, the end of exile for Sammar. She saw Rae’s refusal to convert as a double exile: his exile from the faith, but also ‘an exile [Sammar] would take with her wherever she went’ (Aboulela 1999: 112). In Khartoum, she experienced: ‘[another] exile. Doubt, the exile of not being sure that anything existed between them, no tangible proof’ (Aboulela 1999: 159). This time, though Sammar prepares to leave Sudan for the United Kingdom, she no longer feels that as an exile, for her sense of exile was repeatedly linked with her separation from Rae.

Rae’s domestication has another dimension. His conversion signals a turn away from the political engagement that characterized him and was central to his work: ‘I’ve decided it’s time for me to write a textbook and not concentrate so much on analysing current affairs,’ he tells Sammar (Aboulela 1999:176). It is no coincidence that when Rae discovers the spiritual dimension of Islam and allows himself to be absorbed in it, he loses interest in the political Islam that had fascinated him as an academic. The withdrawal from the public sphere and from political engagement is in line with a particular Islamic discourse discernible in Aboulela’s work more widely: Islam is presented as a matter of personal faith, expressed in everyday practices in the private sphere. Yet this seemingly apolitical, domesticated Islamism is in fact ideological. Aboulela associates the west with secularism, and religious piety (exclusively Islamic) therefore amounts to a rejection of the western way of life, its values and its corrupting influence on the non-western world.

Life in the secular west is repeatedly depicted in Aboulela’s fiction as unsatisfactory and fragmented. Since cultural conflict is expressed through the prism of the private, domestic sphere, the theme of broken or dysfunctional families is a recurring one. The fragmentation is partly a consequence of migration: *Coloured Lights* opens with the story that lends its title to the collection; its Sudanese narrator, working in London on a temporary basis for the BBC World Service, reflects on her separation from her husband, who works in Kuwait, and from her daughters, who remained in Khartoum with her parents. ‘It seemed that the fate of our generation is separation, from our country or our family. We are ready to go anywhere in search of the work we cannot find at home’ (Aboulela 2001: 2). While economic hardship and political upheaval in Sudan and other African countries drives Aboulela’s characters across the globe (and often back and forth, as visits to the homeland feature in several of the stories), the sense of rootlessness and discontinuity is compounded by a conflict of values.

Marriage to a westerner leads to dissatisfaction, at best. In the story ‘Souvenirs’, the gaps between Yassir, a Sudanese migrant living in Aberdeen, and his Scottish wife, Emma, cannot be bridged. ‘What he considered luxuries, she considered necessities. Like the Bambi wallpaper in [their daughter’s] room must be bought to match the curtains, which match the bedspread, which match Thumper on the pillowcase’ (Aboulela 2001: 15). From her position of western privilege, Emma sees nothing in her husband’s homeland, which she refuses to visit, but dangers such as ‘[typhoid], yellow fever, cholera, TB’ (17). Caught between the two worlds, Yassir’s ambivalence is reflected in his relationship with his daughter, Samia: his feelings toward her are ‘jammed up, unable to flow’ (18).

Dina, the protagonist of ‘The Boy from the Kebab Shop’, is the offspring of another mixed marriage. Her Egyptian mother, Shushu, was disowned by her family when she married a Scot whom she grew to despise:

The good-looking *khawagah,* who had pursued and enchanted her in the Gezira Club, whisked her off her feet and away from her family, had brought her to a drab life, in a drab place. In Scotland, he lost the charisma that Africa bestows on the white man, and became the average, kind-hearted father that Dina grew up with. (Aboulela 2001: 62)

After her husband’s death, Shushu spends her days drinking and watching Egyptian films on TV, providing Dina with ‘snippets of information about Egyptian culture’ with her ‘acerbic and surprisingly witty’ commentary (63). This is the only tenuous, mediated connection Dina has to her maternal heritage: she does not speak Arabic and relies on English subtitles to follow the films. Fatherless and with an alcoholic mother, Dina is left to fend for herself in a culture where support groups such as Weight Watchers and AA are prevalent. But if they have any effect at all (Shushu brushes off the suggestion to go to an AA meeting), they seem to do more harm than good: Shushu ‘was always on a diet’ and ‘imposed those diets on her daughter too who was even more overweight’ (59). When Dina encounters a nourishing maternal figure, a Muslim woman nursing her baby, she is ‘taken aback, slightly repulsed’ (59). The narrator comments, dispelling any doubt that Dina’s broken home represents a wider problem: ‘As an average British girl of seventeen, Dina had seen plenty of nudity but she had never seen a woman breastfeed a baby’ (60). British culture, it is implied, sexualizes its youth, but deprives them of the deepest, most natural personal connections. The average British girl is completely unprepared for her own future as a mother, and it is no wonder, then, that the basis of a healthy family life is lacking.

Against this cultural deficiency in the sphere of domesticity, Aboulela sets a clear alternative, embodied by Kassim, who works at a kebab shop and who is, like Dina, ‘[half] Scottish, half Arab’ (61). Their relationship begins when he serves her food at a fundraiser organized by the Muslim Students’ Society, and continues to blossom when he brings her lunch the next day. Dina, starved of food and emotion at home, receives Kassim’s advances with ‘gratitude and pleasure’ (63). Kassim is a ‘Revert’, a Muslim discovering his religion, and although he gains knowledge in the class he attends at the mosque, it is the practice of Islam in everyday life that turns faith into a ‘rhythmic reality, a feasible way of life’ (64). Dina is drawn to Kassim and to the sense of belonging he offers her. When she visits him at the kebab shop and utters the greeting ‘Salamu Alleikum’ for the first time, she is ‘not an outsider … not a customer, but one of “them”, pushing open a private door … as if she was part of the family too’ (69). Islam is the way to family life: Dina, though descended ‘from generations of Muslims’, had ‘never seen anyone praying’, and feels ‘fear’ and ‘embarrassment’ when she walks into the shop’s storage room and finds Kassim in mid-prayer (70). Just as she recoiled from the sight of a woman breastfeeding, prayer seems unnatural to this average British girl. Faith is thus linked with family life — traditional and wholesome. At the end of the story, Dina must make a decision, her options expressed again as an opposition between nourishment and hunger, leaving no doubt as to the right choice: ‘She paused on the pavement, hesitating between the succulent mystic life he promised, and the peckish unfulfilment of her parent’s home’ (71).

The themes of family, faith and cultural conflict are explored again in *Minaret*. Najwa, the narrator, a Sudanese woman raised in a secular, wealthy and westernized family, finds strength and solace in Islam when political upheaval and exile tear her family apart and strip her of material comfort. Najwa’s religious awakening, like Kassim’s in ‘The Boy from the Kebab Shop’, is driven by everyday practices and by the sense of belonging offered by the community of Muslims, particularly Muslim women. At the class she regularly attends at the mosque, she shies away from discussions of Sharia law: ‘the sisters, especially the young British-born ones and the converts, like to discuss and give their opinions. But I become fragmented and deflated in discussions; I never know which point of view I support’ (Aboulela 2005: 79). Instead, she favours the Tajweed class, where she learns to pronounce the words of the Qur’an correctly. This ‘concentration on technique soothes [her]’; she ‘forgets everything around [her]’, and ‘all is calm and peaceful’ (79). The power of the very words of the Qur’an, the miracle of the text invoked by Sammar in *The Translator*, finds its expression here, too.

Like Sammar’s faith, Najwa’s devotion is divorced from political activism. When Tamer, her employer’s younger brother and a revert like her, expresses frustration with the fact that ‘unless you’re political people think you’re not a strong Muslim’, she readily admits she is ‘afraid of politics’ (117). The rejection of what are perceived as western values is more explicit here, and at times extreme. Looking back on her relationship with Anwar, a communist activist, before she found religion, and on his cavalier attitude to premarital sex, Najwa reflects: ‘Who would care if I became pregnant, who would be scandalized? …. A few years back, getting pregnant would have shocked Khartoum society…. And now nothing, no one. This empty space was called freedom’ (174-5). Najwa performs a double rhetorical move here. She links a specific and limited aspect of personal liberty – premarital sex, which in a traditional Islamic society, such as the one she had left behind, would be judged as indicative of loose morals – with alienation: in exile, no one would condemn her, because there is no sense of a community she needs to answer to, but also no community to draw support from. More significant, in terms of Aboulela’s representation of western values and their contrast with the principles of Islam, is the way Najwa, by focusing on sexual mores, trivializes a wider concept of individual freedom that is central to post-Enlightenment philosophical and political discourses in the west, reducing it to an empty cipher and rejecting it altogether. As Aboulela, the author-cum-translator, points out, in the movement between cultures, a ‘thing has high value here, a certain weight, move it to another place and it becomes nothing’ (Aboulela 2002: 201). Najwa’s yearning for family life is so great that she is willing, even longing, to give up her personal freedom completely. She confides in her friend Shahinaz: “I wish we were living centuries ago and, instead of just working for Tamer’s family, I would be their slave” (Aboulela 2005: 214--15). Shahinaz’s response — “I can’t believe that you’re saying this. No one in their right mind wants to be a slave” (215) — makes it clear, however, that Najwa’s meekness and submissiveness, evident throughout the novel, is presented as one of the possible positions that Muslim women take, by no means unopposed.

Najwa’s regressive fantasy of an idealized past could be a result, as Hassan maintains, of ‘her situation as a veiled Muslim woman in Britain, isolated and constantly bombarded by hostile representations of her religion as oppressive’ (Hassan 2008: 315). Yet Aboulela’s wider literary project, which addresses these hostile representations, is rooted in the present and offers a counter-representation of Islam as a redemptive force. In her narratives, religion has the power to heal the fragmentation and alienation experienced in a western (or westernized) society. Thus, as Najwa reads out a prayer at the mosque during Eid, her ‘voice breaks, the words blur. Yet [she] is not sad, this is a happy occasion and [she] is happy that [she belongs] here, that [she] is no longer outside, no longer defiant’ (Aboulela 2005: 184). Prayer has a similar effect on Sammar in The Translator:

Now she stood alone under the high ceiling of the ancient college, began to say silently, *All praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all the world, the Compassionate, the Merciful* ... and the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinters inside her coming together. (Aboulela 1999: 66)

The Islamism Aboulela promotes is a personal matter of faith, focused on and defined by the private sphere. It involves a withdrawal into the domestic sphere and a disavowal of personal freedom that can be seen as regressive. This disengagement from the public sphere is, as Hassan maintains, what distinguishes Aboulela’s Islamism from its ‘radical’ twin (Hassan 2008: 317).

Unlike her protagonists, Aboulela herself engages in a cultural project that is public, ideological and therefore political. Key to this project is Aboulela’s representation of herself, a non-western author writing in English to a western readership, as a translator. By employing this term, Aboulela seems to engage in a familiar discourse of cultural exchange. Hassan’s definition of *The Translator* as translational literature helps clarify the parameters of this discourse. Translational literature, he explains, foregrounds and problematizes the act of translation; it emphasizes ‘the complexity of cultural and linguistic negotiations and their ideological investments, [shows] the limits of translation, and [constructs] new models of identity based on cultural exchange and mutual transformation’ (Hassan 2008: 304).

*The Translator*, while staging and problematizing the act of translation, creates, along with Aboulela’s other works, a form of translation that does not promote ‘cultural exchange’ or the idea of a mutual transformation. The norms of hegemonic translation, which Aboulela challenges, grow out of western religious and philosophical traditions. One of the fundamental principles of this paradigm is the idea of equivalence: the very word *translation* ‘suggests a carrying across, indicating that the relationship between text and translation should be a strong form of equivalence’ (Tymoczko 2006: 23). The metaphoric idea of equivalence can be traced to the physical practice of ‘conveying sacred relics, unchanged, from place to place’ (Tymoczko 2006: 14). The western bias of the terms structuring the discussion is revealed, for instance, in Butt’s analysis of the novel: the ‘paradox’ of Sammar’s situation, she argues, ‘is that she is devoted to the task of translating Arabic texts…into English’, but ‘never makes an effort to translate herself into the Western culture with her Islamic beliefs’ (Butt 2009: 173). Not only is there a demand that the non-western migrant take on western culture, but an assumption that she can translate herself — carry herself across from one culture to another — with her core, her Islamic beliefs, unchanged.

The model of translation Aboulela posits in the novel—Rae’s conversion— disavows the possibility and, more importantly, the *desirability* of the notion of equivalence. It also rejects the assumption that the cultural encounters that attend increased migration and global mobility *should* lead to plurality and hybridization. If ‘[globalized] modernity … demands a revision of all kinds of “purity”: of culture, nationality, religion or identity’, as Butt suggests (170), then Aboulela resists globalized modernity itself. While *The Translator*, like *Minaret* and the stories of *Coloured Lights*, throws the realities of migration and globalization into relief, staging a recurrent, even constant movement between ‘here’ and ‘there’, in cultural terms the movement is unidirectional. In a world of migration, flux, and discontinuity, God is the only constant: ‘Only Allah is eternal, only Allah is eternal’, Sammar reminds herself, as she dismantles, after Tarig’s death, all the traces of the life they shared (Aboulela 1999: 9). It is a lesson that is ‘hard to learn’ (9), but it is a worthy one. By the end of the novel, when faith has brought healing to the torn home, the convert Rae recognizes the transcendence of Islam: ‘Ours isn’t a religion of suffering … nor is it tied to a particular place’ (Aboulela 1999: 179). As Rae is translated into Islam, conveyed from one culture to another, his core of western secularism is transformed, and western universalism and rationalism give way faith in a universal, transcendent truth.

The untranslatability of Islam that lies at the heart of *The Translator* also structures

Aboulela’s theory and practice of cultural translation. The transcendent truth of Islam cannot be translated, but more importantly, it needs not be translated, and perhaps must not be translated: it simply needs to be recognized and believed in. Aboulela is not attempting to convert her readers; Sammar’s attempt to convert Rae has shown the futility of such an attempt. Rather, she is making an argument against the translation of Muslims into a western value system. Thus, Aboulela, addressing the reader in a western language, employing the rhetoric of translation in her work and referring to her own role as translator, undermines the culturally conditioned expectations these terms raise.

 Moreover, Aboulela’s literary project as a whole challenges the familiar narrative of the translator as neutral cultural mediator. Mona Baker observes that translators ‘are depicted in our disciplinary discourse as honest and detached brokers who operate largely in the “spaces between” cultures’ (Baker 2005: 11). Like Tymoczko (Tymoczko 2003: 199), Baker maintains that this view romanticizes the role of translation and translators and warns that ‘we abstract them out of history, out of narratives that necessarily shape their outlook on life’ (Baker 2005: 11). Aboulela is not a ‘detached broker’ and does not try to mediate between two cultural options she sees as equally valid. Reminding us that translators are not abstractions, that they do not operate in a no-man’s land between cultures, but are deeply rooted in, and committed to, particular cultural and ideological narratives, Aboulela resists and subverts the notions of transparency, invisibility and domestication dominant in Anglo--American models of translation as she rejects the metaphorical domestication of Muslim immigrants in western, secular society.

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