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Self-Adaptation and Islamic Cultural Translation in Aboulela's Diasporic Narratives

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Abstract: Immigration has always been a taxing experience that shaped and reshaped immigrants' identities. As people move, their identities are constantly reconstructed by cultural practices, national affiliations, and religious beliefs. It is within this context that the present paper adopts an analogical approach to examine the experiences depicted in Laila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*. The main concern of this research is to explore how the author translates her cultural heritage while crossing both territorial and cultural borders in her narratives and to what extent this journey reshapes the multiple facets of her identity as a British, Arab, and Muslim woman. The investigation demonstrates that Aboulela's protagonists engage in processes of self-adaptation and cultural translation to reconstruct their identities. Far from being passive exiles, they succeed in stitching together their fragmented selves through faith, memory, and love, repositioning Islam as a source of dignity, continuity, and agency in diasporic modernity. These protagonists struggled fiercely for adaptation and cultural preservation. Ultimately, Aboulela destabilizes the dichotomies of East/West and tradition/modernity, thereby succeeding in rewriting the figure of the invisible Arab into a new hybrid construct that accommodates both tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Arab women, cultural translation, displacement, identity negotiation, Leila Aboulela, self-adaptation.

1- Introduction

With the modern global and migratory context, displacement stories are now crucial spaces in which concerns surrounding identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation are being examined and contested. The acts of travel and movement always recreate people's sense of self, with people crossing borders, so too are their cultural practices, national affiliations, and religious commitments reshaped. Resettlement overseas is not a one-off event, but an evolving process of accommodation through social and cultural negotiations, entangled in new power dynamics and cultural contact that may prove enriching as well as disorienting. These individuals inhabit what Homi Bhabha refers to as the "third space," a place that is neither here nor there, where borders become effaced, cultural borders are renegotiated, and hybrid identities are formed. This in-between position not only allows them to broker multiple lives but also enables them to rewrite their histories, speak to differences in culture, and forge new tales of belonging.

Arab women in Western countries experience problems that are distinctly gendered and culturally defined. Their externally recognizable ethnic and racial features, along with transnational political conflicts between Arabs and Muslims and their recurring stereotypical depiction in popular culture, maximize their sense of "Otherness" and reinforce outsider status. They have to navigate between value systems and cultural systems that themselves may appear incompatible, and navigate borders whose borders shift in relation to the outside world's contexts and the inside world's tradition. These tensions complicate their diasporic lives more

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than others, as they weigh the need to assimilate against maintaining heritage and validating belief.

It is precisely within this terrain of displacement, hybridity, and gendered negotiation that Leila Aboulela situates her fiction. The novels under study reflect the constant struggle of Muslim women in diaspora, and provide a fertile ground for rich analyses of the emotional and cultural outcomes of migration. Aboulela's heroines, Sammar and Najwa, demonstrate how women navigate the disorientation of relocation as they strive to rebuild their lives. Exemplifying, therefore, the metaphor of "stitching identities" by patching together their grief, memories, and diverse experiences of fragmented but survivable forms of self, engaging into a process of self-adaptation that reflect the constant struggle of diasporic women to navigate loss and cultural friction yet firmly maintaining continuity in religion.

This paper examines Aboulela's novels through the interrelated frameworks of identity stitching, self-accommodation, and Islamic cultural translation. Cultural translation in this regard is not the simplistic handing over of tradition, but rather Aboulela's effort to represent Islam as a vital source of dignity, agency, and community in Western modernity. Sammar's professional role as an Arabic-English translator in *The Translator* and Najwa's religious reconversion to Islam in *Minaret* both illustrate how religious and cultural values are read, practiced, and redefined in diasporic settings. In this way, Aboulela challenges Orientalist assumptions and constructs discursive spaces in which Arab Muslim women can speak for themselves.

Ultimately, this study examines how Aboulela mediates her cultural heritage in her fiction, working across territorial and cultural borders, and investigates how this process remaps her multifaceted identity as an Arab, Muslim, and British-based writer. By readings of the protagonists' experiences of faith, memory, love, and belonging, the paper argues that Aboulela's fiction does a distinct work of Islamic cultural translation- one that destabilizes binary East/West formations and tradition/modernity binaries- while offering diasporic women innovative ways of creating hybrid yet coherent selves.

2. Representations of Identity in Diasporic Discourse

The immigration process has traditionally been described as bewildering and transformative, demanding fundamental psychological and cultural shifts among those who go through it. Noh and Avison (1996) assert that, in addition to requiring individuals to adapt to new physical and emotional landscapes, migration also demands that they adjust to new cultural environments. Historian Oscar Handlin (1951), in his classic "The Uprooted", further describes the migration process as one that is quite "shattering" for immigrant culture at both individual and group levels. For Handlin, "the history of immigration is a history of alienation and its consequences" (p. 4). Immigrants are uprooted from the security of homogeneous societies where they share values and traditions and must navigate belonging in new environments that challenge them to reconstitute who they are and where they belong.

Theoretical models of identity formation emphasize the complexity of this process. Hays (2001) proposes that identity is plural rather than singular and distinguishes between dominant identities, held by members of positions of social power, and minority identities, held by individuals and groups who occupy marginalized or subordinated positions. As environments change, migrants gain new roles that, in turn, call for self-definition adjustments. Newman (2004, 2006) stresses that identity is not an essence but a constellation of "matching, opposing, intersecting, and separate concepts of self." Within this model, individuals may possess several identities at one time, a position echoed in Clark's (1999) suggestion of the "non-unitary self"

and Rossiter's (2007) emphasis on "possible selves." For Arabs in the West, this might involve a hybrid location, such as Arab–British, Arab–French, or Arab–American, further modulated by factors including gender, class, religion, and historical experience.

Women in diaspora, particularly, experience migration as a multi-layered cultural transformation. Ralston (2002), in her work on South Asian women, identifies that immigrant women are not only leaving territorial boundaries behind but also cultural, social, and psychic ones. Socialization acquired in their country of origin is likely to be at odds with the host nation's values and norms and induces dislocation, rupture, and loss. These theoretical models find their persuasive articulation in the work of Leila Aboulela, whose protagonists embody the very act of 'stitching' hybrid identities across religion and cultural translation. Her fiction situates this negotiation at its center, framing Islamic practice not as a cultural marker or stabilizing anchor, but as a dynamic and living resource for resilience, adaptation, and agency in the face of displacement.

This process resonates with Anthias's (2001) notion that cultural adaptation requires learning to see the world through the host society's lens while simultaneously preserving alternative modes of meaning. Traveling from one culture to another involves a provisional "disabling," and the immigrant must learn how to think like the local community. This means adopting new "recipes" for social engagement, experimented with and solidified through usage. Veterans of migration and social networks typically facilitate this. Still, interaction with members of the host population -in terms of work market activity, political engagement, or everyday contact - is the most effective instructor of adaptation. Over time, internalization of social norms and cultural codes diminishes experiences of foreignness and produces a sense of partial belonging.

The experiential complexity of these negotiations has been eloquently accounted for by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) in her theorization of "borderlands." Borderlands, for Anzaldúa, are not only geographical but cultural and psychological spaces within which contending cultural structures collide, creating what she terms "un choque" a cultural collision that is marked by tension, violence, and creative possibility. Arab Muslim women, as Aboulela demonstrates, experience "double marginalization," facing gendered subordination and racialized stereotyping. They exist between rival cultural systems, belonging fully to neither, yet navigating both. This liminality produces hybrid and overlapping identities, structured by shifting relations of power.

Diasporic women are often suspended between rival cultural systems, borrowing from both but not entirely from either. This liminal position produces divergent and overlapping identities, those that are shaped in shifting relations of power. For Arab women, this exposure is exacerbated by the intersection of gendered subordination and racialized stereotyping. They must deal with a "double marginalization" as both immigrants and women, being habitually objectified by orientalist representations ongoing both from the colonial archive and from the post-9/11 "war on terror" rhetoric.

In this contested terrain, fiction has emerged as a form of resistance politics, redefining itself. The "Oriental woman," formerly objectified within orientalist ideology, is refigured in diasporic women's fiction as a figure of agency who recuperates speech. Arab women writers reclaim reductionist representations through narratives of fiction, exposing the complex nuances of diasporic existence and staking a claim to self-defined identities. To become a diasporic self that is representative of subjectivity -not one constructed along nationalistic or orientalist matrices - is something that requires endless negotiation along intersecting matrices of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and religion. Cultural translation and adaptation, according to Anthias (2001), are processes and not instances that reconstruct meaning and belonging.

Although several Arab women writers have illuminated the challenges of migration, dislocation, and adjustment in their works, few have explored the experience of return and its influence on diasporic identity. The return theme complicates the narrative of displacement by situating the diasporic subject within an increasingly cosmopolitan global trajectory of mobility and transcultural negotiation. So books such as Aboulela's provide fertile ground for investigation of how identities are "sewn together" across spaces of rupture, creating subjectivities that are neither fixed nor predetermined but dynamically adapted and translated in response to shifting cultural and historical contexts.

3. Cultural Translation as a Mechanism of Self-Adaptation and Identity Negotiation in *The Translator* and *Minaret*

The concept of Translation in this research means cultural and social, rather than only linguistic. It refers to the negotiation through which characters engage with different places, navigate dislocation, and struggle for hybrid identity formation and self-redefinition. In Aboulela's fiction, the experience of mobility and migration is inscribed as a condition of disorientation: characters move between spaces and cultures while simultaneously confronting the global forces that shape everyday life in particular localities. These narratives register the aftermath of border crossing at both linguistic and existential levels, revealing what Blommaert and Van der Donckt describe as "a dynamics of semiotic localization and delocalization" (2013, p. 146). In this sense, cultural relocation significantly alters the meaning of existence, as identity is reconstructed in relation to social, political, and religious geographies.

The works of contemporary diasporic Middle Eastern women writers, such as Laila Aboulela, belong to this category of "cultural translation writing". These authors are not only writing in a global language but also translating their cultures for diverse audiences. According to Wail Hassan (2011), Arab immigrant writers can be considered "hybrid cultural translators" insofar as they embody both the homeland and the hostland. Writing in English positions them at a crossroads: while they are expected to interpret their culture for Western readers, they do not occupy the detached stance of Orientalist observers. Instead, they write from within the Arab and Islamic tradition while also inhabiting the West. Hassan explains:

By writing in English, Arab immigrant writers have often found themselves in a position where they are expected to interpret their culture for their readers. However, they do not stand outside the 'Orient,' like the European or American Orientalist, since they are of the 'Orient' by virtue of their background. Still, they are also of the 'Occident' by reason of immigration and acculturation. Therefore, their position represents a merger of the two classic stances of the native informant and the foreign expert" (pp. 28–29).

While Hassan highlights hybridity, his argument does not fully address the "politics of writing back". Arab Anglophone women's literature, in particular, takes a counter-hegemonic stance by revising Orientalist frameworks and producing narratives of resistance and self-definition. As such, immigrant writing operates along two axes: (1) it bears historical significance in responding to East–West political encounters; and (2) it embodies an ontological and linguistic in-betweenness that foregrounds mobility and mediation. As Loredana Polezzi (2006) observes, both travelers and translators occupy ambiguous positions: they may "deceive, confound and betray, as well as act as reliable guides, mediators and witnesses" (p. 171).

Travel, for Aboulela, is not only thematic but also foundational to her career as a writer. Displacement provided the initial impetus for her fiction, particularly as she grappled with homesickness and the anti-Arab sentiment that surged during the Gulf War. In an interview with Eisa Saleh (1992), Aboulela explained that her writing emerged as both a response to

missing Sudan and as a reaction to the "anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiment in the media." Writing became both a coping mechanism and a form of cultural intervention. Similarly, in her autobiographical essay "And My Fate Was Scotland," Aboulela (2004) recalls that the most challenging adjustment in migration was not climatic or material but spiritual: moving "from a religious Muslim culture to a secular one" produced what she calls an "eternal culture shock" (p. 189). This sense of estrangement, however, generates the imaginative energy of her fiction, where cultural translation is central.

In *The Translator* (1999), the protagonist Sammar undergoes a profound transformation following the death of her husband. Her journey of mourning and eventual reconciliation with Rae Isles, a Scottish lecturer in Middle Eastern history who converts to Islam, dramatizes the entanglement of personal loss with political realities. The novel situates identity reconstruction within the geopolitics of the Gulf War, Islamic revival movements, and media stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims. Sammar, for example, is "translated" by Scottish society as an emblem of Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the Gulf War (Aboulela, 1999, p. 96). Rae himself, despite his sympathy for Arab causes, is "translated" as a suspect foreigner by his own community (p. 97).

Similarly, *Minaret* (2005) reflects on post-9/11 stereotypes and the Islamophobic associations projected onto Arab Muslim identities. Najwa, the Sudanese protagonist, observes how young Arab men with beards are automatically identified as "terrorists" in British public imagination: "Tall, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 100). The novel underscores the precariousness of Muslim visibility in Western societies, while simultaneously portraying Islamic practice as a source of resilience, community, and cultural continuity.

Across her works, Aboulela demonstrates that cultural translation is not a peripheral theme but a central mechanism of diasporic self-adaptation. Her characters embody the tension between alienation and belonging, loss and resilience, displacement and re-rooting. Through them, Aboulela performs what this paper identifies as "Islamic cultural translation": the negotiation of diasporic existence through faith, memory, and narrative, producing identities that are stitched together across shifting cultural and political landscapes.

4. Faith, Translation, and Reweaving of Identity in *The Translator*

Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) stands as a pivotal contribution to Anglophone Arab literature, articulating an Islamic counter-discourse to the dislocations of diaspora. Through the Sudanese protagonist Sammar, the narrative stages questions of cultural integration, religious belonging, and identity reconstruction within the cold landscape of Aberdeen, Scotland. As Ait Nasseur (2024) observes, Arab Muslim immigrants live a "cultural criss-cross" between their Islamic background and a Western Christian-secular context. This tension often produces dilemmas of in-betweenness, integration, and prejudice. Aboulela's novel dramatizes this condition, but, unlike earlier postcolonial works, it resists portraying hybridity as tragic or impossible. Instead, Aboulela shifts toward what Taha (2023) calls "an alternative Islamic vision," one that frames faith as a resource for resilience and cultural translation rather than as a burden or impediment.

The novel's opening scenes immediately inscribe the alienation of the immigrant in the North. Sammar's recollections emphasize the harsh, foreign environment: "She was afraid of rain, fog, snow, and wind… Last year, during the dark fog, she hid indoors for four days, surviving on the last packet of pasta and tea without milk" (*The Translator*, p. 3). Aboulela employs such imagery to highlight the importance of finding spiritual grounding in exile.

At the heart of this re-vision is Sammar's uncompromising attachment to Islam, which shapes both her private life and her relationship with Rae, a Scottish orientalist. Love, in Aboulela's novel, cannot be divorced from faith. As Sammar insists to Rae, "I cannot be with you if you are not a Muslim" (*The Translator,* p. 92). This declaration captures the refusal of many Arab Muslim immigrants, as Ait Nasseur (2024) notes, to succumb to "the pressing cultural hegemony coming from Westerners." However, Aboulela does not frame this refusal as rigidity or exclusion; instead, she portrays it as an ethical stance in which faith redefines intimacy on new terms. Rae's scholarly detachment -his orientalist fascination with Islam as an object of study - is gradually transformed into a spiritual awakening, culminating in his conversion.

Faith in *The Translator* is not presented merely as a marker of cultural identity but as a dynamic resource for survival and adaptation. In moments of solitude and exile, prayer becomes Sammar's lifeline: "She wanted to sew her life back into one piece, stitch it with prayers and patience, mend the tear that death and exile had made" (*The Translator,* p. 64). The stitching metaphor here provides the central image of Aboulela's diasporic vision. Identity is not conceived as a stable essence but as a relational and narrative process, constantly reshaped through displacement, memory, and faith (Hall, 1990; Bhabha, 1994). Rather than dramatizing fragmentation alone, the novel depicts the possibility of repair through Islam, where prayer and ritual allow Sammar to reconstruct a sense of continuity across rupture.

Equally significant is the motif of translation, which functions both literally and metaphorically. Sammar's role as an interpreter between Arabic and English symbolizes her in-between position. Still, she perceives her work as carrying an ethical weight: "It is not just words I translate. It is meanings, histories, beliefs. They are not mine to change" (*The Translator,* p. 101). Here, translation dramatizes the challenges of cultural mediation, exposing the asymmetry between Western secular discourse and Muslim epistemologies. Aboulela's narrative insists that reciprocity is possible, but only on the condition of mutual recognition of faith. Rae's eventual embrace of Islam signals not a collapse into sameness but a transformative re-reading of the self, illustrating what Taha (2023) calls the poetics of translation that defines Aboulela's work.

By situating her fiction within an Islamic epistemology, Aboulela departs from the reactive "writing back" mode of earlier postcolonial literature (Said, 1994). Instead, she constructs a generative model of diaspora in which religion operates as a means of re-rooting identity in exile. As Sammar prays for Rae during Ramadan - "She asked not for herself but for him, that he would find the light" (*The Translator,* p. 160) - the novel foregrounds the ethical horizon of Islamic humanism, where individual transformation becomes the basis for transcultural belonging. In this respect, Aboulela contributes to what Taha (2023) and others describe as Muslim immigrant literature: narratives that resist Islamophobic stereotypes while articulating new forms of identity shaped by migration, memory, and faith. *The Translator* thus "stitches" together a vision of diaspora that is redemptive rather than tragic, dialogic rather than oppositional, and anchored in an Islamic cultural translation that redefines both self and Other.

5. Self-adaptation and Spiritual reorientation in the *Minaret*

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) foregrounds the dual processes of self-adaptation and spiritual reorientation as integral to Najwa's diasporic trajectory. The 1985 military coup in Sudan precipitates the collapse of Najwa's privileged life in Khartoum, forcing her into exile in London, where she becomes a domestic worker and witnesses the fragmentation of her family. This radical disjuncture constitutes what scholars have described as a "traumatic interruption of time" in which 3one life literally stops, replaced by a completely different one" (Taha, 2023). Najwa articulates this rupture in the novel's opening confession: "I have come down in the

world. I have reached a point where the ceiling is low and there is not much room to move. Most of the time, I am used to it. Most of the time, I am fine. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 1). The image of confinement conveys both her loss of social status and the constrained conditions of exile. However, in the same scene, she glimpses the minaret of Regent's Park Mosque: "I look up and see the minaret of Regent's Park mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn" (p. 1). The juxtaposition of decline with the uplifting vision of the mosque's minaret signals the emergence of faith as a stabilising anchor in the midst of displacement.

Najwa's adaptation in London is not restricted to material survival or cultural assimilation but is deeply tied to her spiritual awakening. Religion functions both as a practice and as a spatial orientation, aligning with David Harvey's notion that place is socially and materially constructed. Islam becomes, for Najwa, a new geography that reorders her diasporic life within London's fragmented urban topography. Scholars argue that Aboulela inscribes "religious space" into diasporic cartographies, where the mosque and ritual practices generate a sense of belonging in the absence of a homeland (Almir Mer, 2024). This is enacted corporeally when Najwa chooses to wear the headscarf. Far from passive submission, the veil is portrayed as an active remaking of the self: she sees herself as "regal like [her] mother, mysterious. [With] the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 246). Through veiling, Najwa asserts a renewed identity, simultaneously inscribing dignity and modesty into her body and reconfiguring her presence in British public space.

Najwa's embrace of religious practices—daily prayers, fasting, Qur'anic study groups—further illustrates this inner reconstitution. These practices mark her gradual spiritual reorientation, but Aboulela resists representing the process as linear or untroubled. Najwa often recalls her earlier cosmopolitan life in Khartoum, filled with social privilege and glamour, and experiences tension between this secular past and her present religious devotion. Such ambivalence reflects what critics identify as the liminal condition of the Muslim migrant subject who is caught between loss and renewal (Bouregbi, 2021). Nonetheless, Najwa's choices reveal agency. Her decision to veil, to attend the mosque, and to disengage from consumerist values indicates not passive submission but a deliberate redefinition of self through faith. By privileging modesty and restraint, she consciously rejects the materialism and superficiality that once defined her elite existence.

Spiritual reorientation thus becomes a form of healing and self-stitching. It enables Najwa to cope with displacement by reframing loss within a continuum of faith, giving coherence to a fractured self. As she admits, "Most of the time, I am good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 1), underscoring how religious practice tempers grief with acceptance. Importantly, this is not a final resolution but an ongoing process: Najwa remains aware of the fragility of her identity and the ambivalence of her diasporic condition. Aboulela portrays faith as a dynamic resource that allows Najwa to inhabit exile with dignity, anchoring her identity in Islam while negotiating the cultural and social dislocations of migration. *In Minaret*, then, self-adaptation and spiritual reorientation are inseparable, revealing how diasporic identity is not only translated across cultures but also inwardly transformed through religion.

6. Conclusion

Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) demonstrate that diasporic identity is never static but is continuously reshaped across shifting terrains of culture, faith, and memory. Culture here emerges both as a field of opening and association and as a site of challenge to the

taxonomies of colonial discourse. The narration of lived or imagined experience itself operates as a form of translation—a movement across time and space—since it requires rendering into words and images realities that have occurred, might have happened, or may yet occur. Just as Aboulela translates her vision into narrative form, her readers engage in reciprocal acts of interpretation, mapping the text into their own imaginative and cultural frameworks.

Through strategies of cultural cosmopolitanism and religious plurality, Aboulela succeeds in rewriting the figure of the "invisible Arab" into a new hybrid construct that accommodates both tradition and modernity. Migration and translation, as her novels show, become processes of negotiating, dismantling, and reassembling the borders of naturalized cultural identities. Sammar embodies this cosmopolitan posture in *The Translator* and Najwa in *Minaret*, whose relationships with the foreign Other dramatize the painful yet generative process of reconciling parochial attachments with global encounters. Both heroines initially struggle with the tensions of hybridity but ultimately manage to translate the foreign and the familiar into new subjectivities, deconstructing and reconstituting their cultural identities to accommodate multiple worldviews.

In this way, Aboulela constructs counter-narratives of migration and religion that disrupt the linear, progressive temporality of the Western nation-state. Her fiction replays the disjunctive temporality of modernity—its broken relationship with colonial legacies—through residual and emergent practices that unsettle dominant ideologies. What is especially striking is how her work foregrounds bilingualism and translation, embedding Arabic phrases, Qur'anic references, hadiths, proverbs, and literary quotations into English-language narratives. These textual and linguistic shifts inscribe ambivalence and multiplicity at the heart of diasporic identity. More than mere linguistic ornament, these interjections articulate a strong sense of nostalgia for roots and homeland, while also insisting on the possibility of coexistence and hybridity in exile.

Ultimately, Aboulela's novels reveal that diasporic Muslim women, far from being passive victims of exile, are active agents of cultural translation and self-stitching. Through faith, love, and memory, they reimagine fractured identities and recast displacement as a site of both rupture and renewal. By privileging Islamic epistemologies as resources for dignity and belonging, Aboulela destabilizes Orientalist binaries of East/West and tradition/modernity. In doing so, she opens a dialogic space in which Arab Muslim women can narrate themselves as cosmopolitan subjects grounded in faith, yet dynamically negotiating the complexities of global modernity. Her work thus contributes a vital paradigm of hybrid, resilient, and coherent identity, one stitched together through the intertwined processes of migration, translation, and spiritual reorientation.

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