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Aboulela's Fiction: A Critical Analysis of Themes, Ideology, and Contribution to Muslim Immigrant Literature

Bahir Ibrahim Taha
General Directorate of Salahuddin Education, Ministry of Education, Iraq

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ABSTRACT

The fiction of Leila Aboulela sheds light on the changing socio-political and cultural landscape of Britain, particularly in relation to the growth of immigrant Muslim minorities and the Islamic resurgence. Her works explore themes such as migration, cultural perceptions and stereotypes, and the relationship between the sacred and the secular. Aboulela draws inspiration from Tayeb Salih's work but departs from it in significant ways by offering an alternative vision to the challenges of postcolonial nationhood. This paper aims to examine Aboulela's ideological worldview by exploring her allusions to Salih's work in The Translator (1999) and tracing her divergent approach in Colored Lights (2001) and Minaret (2005). Aboulela's contribution to Muslim immigrant literature seeks to articulate an alternative perspective derived from Islam but shaped by immigrant experiences. While her works challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam, they also risk oversimplifying the experiences of Muslim immigrants and reinforcing stereotypes about gender roles.

Introduction

Aboulela's Anglophone Arab Fiction:

Aboulela's fiction sheds light on the evolving socio-political and cultural landscape of Britain, which has transformed since the 1950s and 1960s when Tayeb Salih wrote his early short stories and his famous novel Season of Migration to the North (1966) (Hassan, 2012, p.179). Aboulela's work reflects two significant historical developments of the 1970s and after; the growth of immigrant Muslim minorities in Europe and the United States and the Islamic resurgence, which has attempted to fill the void left by the failure of Arab secular ideologies of modernity (Hassan, 2012, p.179). Aboulela's The Translator (1999), Colored Lights (2001), and, to some extent, her latest novel Minaret (2005), explicitly reference Salih's fiction, drawing inspiration from it and departing from it in significant ways (Hassan, 2012, p.179). While Salih writes in Arabic, Aboulela's fiction is part of the growing corpus of Anglophone Arab fiction.

Aboulela's fiction, like Salih's, explores themes of migration between North and South, cultural perceptions, and stereotypes, and building bridges between former colonizer and colonized. However, while Salih's latest works express the failure of his generation to find adequate answers to the challenges of postcolonial nationhood, Aboulela takes on the challenge and articulates an alternative vision (Hassan, 2012, p.179). Aboulela's works challenge cultural misconceptions and stereotypes, explore the possibilities of cultural translation, and examine the

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relationship between the sacred and the secular.

The brand of Anglophone fiction represented by Aboulela moves beyond the reactive position of "writing back" that has been central to postcolonial criticism. Aboulela's focus is on attempting an epistemological break with colonial discourse rather than merely reversing or rewriting it. While Season of Migration to the North rewrites Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Aboulela's The Translator is less concerned with countering colonial discourse and more interested in creating a dialogue between civilizations. The Translator envisions the possibility of uniting the South and North under the emblem of Islamic humanism, in contrast to Tayeb Salih's novel which depicts the clash of civilizations. Aboulela's works introduce a new narrative logic into Anglophone Arab and African fiction, which draws inspiration from Qur'anic and other Islamic literature, such as Sufi poetry and allegory.

Salih's Season of Migration to the North portrays the crisis of British-educated (post)colonial intellectuals who reject imperialism but remain trapped within its epistemic universe. In contrast, Aboulela's alternative Islamic discourse offers a new perspective that challenges colonial violence. It creates a new literary tradition that is based on Islamic literature and thought, rather than being influenced by the European novel, as was the case with writers of an earlier generation.

Salih's later works, Bandarshah (1971-76) and "Yawm Mubarak 'ala shati' Umm Bab" (1993), reveal a turn towards Sufism in response to the crisis of secular Arab ideology in the late 1960s and 70s (Hassan, 2012, pp.129-180). Aboulela's fiction also incorporates Islamic themes, but this does not contradict Salih's works, especially when we consider the historical context in which Season of Migration to the North was written, at the height of the decolonization movement in the early 1960s, and the influence of mysticism on Salih's other works. Therefore, Aboulela's works continue from where Salih left off in Bandarshah and "Yawm Mubarak" (Hassan, 2012, pp.129-180).

In some of Aboulela's works, such as "The Museum," the psychological divide between the colonizer and colonized remains unbridgeable, echoing the paradigm of Season of Migration to the North and E.M. Forster's A Passage to India. Aboulela's protagonist in "The Museum" shares similarities with Mustafa Sa'eed as both characters hide their humiliation behind cruelty, rudeness, and condescension, making mutual understanding impossible (Hassan, 2012, pp.179-180).

However, Aboulela's works also pay homage to Salih's writing, with direct and indirect quotations from his works. The two parts of The Translator are prefaced with verses by Abu Nuwas, a tenth-century Arab poet that Salih uses as an epigraph in Bandarshah, and a key passage from Season. The title of Aboulela's short story collection, Colored Lights, recalls Mustafa Sa'eed's description of his bedroom in London, and Minaret includes Salih's famous exclamation about the military junta that overthrew the democratically elected government of Sudan in 1989 (Hassan, 2012, pp.179-180).

Aboulela's fiction offers narratives of redemption and fulfillment through Islam, completing the project of Salih's works, which often reflect the disappointments of the 1960s and 70s. While Salih's works depict the failures of the national project, colonial bourgeoisie, postcolonial intellectuals, and secular Arab ideologies of modernity, Aboulela's works embody the slogan of the Islamist movement that emerged in the mid-1970s: "Islam is the solution" (Hassan, 2012, pp.179-180).

Unlike Season of Migration to the North, which portrays a tragic love story, The Translator depicts a North/South romance with a happy ending. Both novels involve journeys by young Sudanese to the North. Sammar, the protagonist in The Translator, was born in Scotland to Sudanese parents who returned home when she was seven years old, a significant number both

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for its mystical associations and because it is the number of years Salih's narrator spends in England (Hassan, 2012, pp.179-180). This creates a generational gap between Sammar, the narrator in Season of Migration to the North, and Mustafa Sa'eed.

As an adult, Sammar makes three journeys to the North: first with her husband, then alone after his death, and finally back again with her four-year-old son and Rae after his conversion. The novel focuses mainly on Sammar's second interval in Scotland and her return to Sudan after her estrangement from Rae. The first journey is reported in flashbacks, and the third remains in the future at the end of the narrative, giving the plot a cyclical quality that echoes the title of Salih's novel, where movement between the North and South is recurrent and inevitable, from one generation to the next (Hassan, 2012, pp.179-180).

In the discourse of Salih's and Aboulela's novels, the North and South are depicted as opposites in weather, culture, and customs, but they define each other. The movement between them is a recurring and inevitable pattern, from one generation to the next.

North-South Weather Contrast:

The opening passages of Season of Migration to the North and The Translator emphasize the contrast between the North and South. The narrator of Season describes the deadly cold climate of the North in contrast to the "life warmth of the tribe," and his experience in England was isolating and dreary (Salih, 1969, p.1). Similarly, Sammar's life alone in Scotland is characterized by confinement within her cold and drab room, her lonely existence, and her memories of the past and dreams of an uncertain future. The novel opens with a dream in which she sees herself trapped at home by the elements, afraid to go out and meet someone due to the hostile weather. She is afraid of rain, fog, snow, and wind, and she watches from her window as others, seemingly superhuman, go about their daily lives even in harsh weather conditions. Last year, during the dark fog, she hid indoors for four days, surviving on the last packet of pasta and tea without milk, and when the fog lifted, she went out famished, rummaging the shops for food (Aboulela, 1999, p.3).

Both Salih and Aboulela define the North and South by extreme weather, with the cold of the North and the heat of the South being equally deadly. Sammar and Salih's narrators prefer Sudan, and in The Translator, Sammar's sense of alienation is accentuated by the Northern winters. Even children and elderly people appear "superhuman" in contrast to her physical helplessness (Hassan, 2012, pp.179-180). Aboulela uses Salih's opening strategy, his frame of reference, and some of his motifs, such as the fog and wind, which appear in the first paragraphs of both The Translator and Season of Migration to the North.

The fog is the first image in an extract from the opening paragraph of Season that Aboulela uses as an epigraph to Part 2 of her novel, where Sammar returns to Sudan. The extract describes the narrator waking up in his familiar bed in his childhood home in Sudan and feeling a sense of assurance as he looks at the palm tree standing in the courtyard. The palm tree symbolizes a being with a background and roots, in contrast to the narrator's sense of being a storm-swept feather (Salih, 1969, pp.1-2; qtd. in Aboulela, 1999, p.121).

Aboulela makes it clear that her literary sources include Season of Migration to the North. In Part 2 of The Translator, a direct quotation from Season establishes an unquestionable frame of reference for the scene of Sammar's return to Sudan. These intertextual links do not parody Salih, but rather "stylize" Season's rhetorical strategies (Hassan, 2012, pp.179-180). Bakhtin distinguishes between stylization and parody, where in stylization, the author's thought follows after someone else's discourse in the same direction, making that direction conventional. In contrast, in parody, every statement about the object strikes a polemical blow against the other's discourse on the same theme. Aboulela's allusions to Season in Part 1 and her direct quotation from it in Part 2 do not contain any such "polemical blows" against that text but rather "stylize" it

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and establish it as an authoritative frame of reference (Hassan, 2012, pp.179-180).

Aboulela's quotation from Season of Migration to the North, which appears as an epigraph in Part 2 of The Translator, omits three important words: "with a purpose" (Salih, 1969, p.2). Sammar's fear of the wind makes her feel like a "storm-swept feather" in Scotland, and back in Sudan, she is "a being with a background, with roots," but not "with a purpose." This omission complicates what appears to be a straightforward borrowing from Salih's text, as Aboulela stops short of equating the experience of her protagonist with that of Salih's narrator. The narrator in Season of Migration to the North feels that he is "a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose" tied to the national project of the newly independent state, although this feeling gradually unravels until the final scene of the novel, where he cries for help (Salih, 1969, p.169). In contrast, The Translator follows the opposite trajectory, with Sammar's discovery of her true purpose occurring during the sacred month of Ramadan when she has been fasting and praying. She comes to recognize her selfishness and prays for Rae's salvation for his own sake, rather than her own (Aboulela, 1999, p.160).

Translation and Spiritual Struggle:

The Translator is a story of spiritual growth, with the central conflict being an internal struggle between worldly desires and spiritual discipline. This theme is prevalent in religious literature across traditions, and is also present in Salih's "A Handful of Dates," "The Cypriot Man," and Meryoud, as well as in Aboulela's texts. While Salih situates this spiritual struggle within a larger historical framework that reflects political and ideological struggles, Aboulela's spiritual struggles rarely have political implications. This distinction characterizes the particular brand of Islam informing the ideological worldview of Aboulela's fiction, which emphasizes the rift between politics and spirituality. This rift also parallels the distinction in the novel between translation and conversion.

Translational literature emphasizes the complexity of cultural and linguistic negotiation and their ideological investments, and shows the limits of translation. It constructs new models of identity based on cultural exchange and mutual transformation, rather than conforming to dominant representations of self and other in the target culture. This class of texts aims to change the discursive and ideological norms of the target culture, in contrast to hegemonic translation, which confirms those norms (Hassan, 2012, p. 178).

Salih's Season of Migration to the North seeks to change cultural norms for both Arab and non-Arab readers by demonstrating the failure of cultural translation under the auspices of Orientalism and nativism. The novel portrays Mustafa Sa'eed's plan for sexual revenge on the empire by playing up its stereotypes of Arabs and Africans. However, his masquerades fail, and he returns to Sudan to live according to another discursive fiction, that of cultural authenticity. The contradictions of his life in England and Sudan are premised on total untranslatability, leading him to disappear, saddling the narrator with a dilemma that is ignored by constructing the fantasy of an unproblematic return to the past announced in the opening scene. The failure of both characters to engage in positive and transformative cultural dialogue is behind the tragic events of the novel.

In contrast, Aboulela responds to the crisis of translation depicted in Season by writing a translational novel, The Translator, which enacts a poetics of translation on several inter-related levels of plot, theme, language, and discourse. The novel announces its subject matter immediately in the title, foregrounding translation both as agency and as a metaphor. The profession of translator is the formal connection between the two protagonists of a love story who are united at the end through mutual compromises and negotiations that transform each of them. The novel is about the possibilities and limits of translation as an avenue to cultural communication, with linguistic transfer and cultural mediation between disparate political discourses and ideological worldviews being the two components of translation. The relationship

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between translation and conversion defines the novel's ideological project (Hassan, 2012, p. 180-181).

Passages in The Translator frequently emphasize the difficulty and sometimes impossibility of translation due to cultural and linguistic incompatibility. Sammar, the protagonist, is hyper-conscious of the effects of the rendition of alien experiences and texts on others. She wonders how much of the truth her audience can handle and describes her work as a translator in ways that emphasize the difficulty and physical characteristics of the manuscript. In one instance, she is translating a manifesto issued by a radical fundamentalist group in southern Egypt. The document's physical characteristics, such as its stains, handwriting, and orthographic errors, are significant semiotic elements that speak to the heart of the problem translation is intended to penetrate. However, these extra-linguistic features are culturally bound and impossible to translate. This renders the document translatable only at the risk of radical transformation that obscures its non-verbal signs and contradictions, making it "pathetic" rather than threatening. Sammar's work as an interpreter for terrorism suspects involves pushing Arabic into English and vice versa, which is a violent process of forcing meaning expressed in one language into another, with different worldviews and rhetorical modes.

Throughout The Translator, linguistic and cultural incommunicability is emphasized through the fixed ideas that Scots and Sudanese hold of each other, the incompatibility of social customs and attitudes, and even the choice of protagonists' names. Sammar struggles to come to terms with Rae's mix of secularism and sympathy to Islam, which she sees as incomprehensible. The homonymy of Rae's name with the Arabic noun for "opinion" renders him "opinionated" to Sammar. Meanwhile, the meaning of Sammar's name clashes with her isolated and alienated condition in Scotland, where her public persona as a veiled, dark-skinned Muslim woman conflicts with her private life. The difference between the symbolic geography, climate, and social customs of North and South, as portrayed in Salih's fiction, is recoded in The Translator as a separation of the public and private in Sudan and Scotland, respectively. In Scotland, social life is fragmented and atomized, reinforced by Sammar's position there as a cultural, racial, and religious Other.

The Translator effectively translates the gendered worldview and religious logic by which a practicing, immigrant Muslim grapples with her love for a non-Muslim man, critiquing not only racism and Islamophobia but also nativism, liberalism, multiculturalism, and Left politics. The novel depicts incidents of racism and harassment of Muslims and also critiques the unconscious racism of liberals and multiculturalists. Sammar's friend Yasmeen exemplifies the nativist position, advising her to find a Sudanese partner instead of dating a non-Muslim man. However, Yasmeen's convictions prove wrong in the resolution of the plot. The academic attitude of researchers, including Rae, is condescendingly detached, attempting to avoid Eurocentrism by studying sacred texts objectively. For Sammar, this attitude is hurtful and above all else, looking down on her.

Conclusion:

Aboulela's Islamism and its representation in her fiction may be viewed as reactive and regressive. The author attempts to move beyond the postcolonial project of nationhood, which was flawed in its pursuit of Eurocentric modernity and adoption of European models of development. However, this Islamism succumbs to the fiction of authenticity, which is a reverse-Eurocentrism. This religiosity is held captive by its perception of a threat and is conservative, rejecting existential freedom, political responsibility, and embracing an idealized past. This ideology has the elements of fundamentalism, but unlike its "radical" twin, it is apolitical. In The Translator, Sammar distinguishes herself from terrorism suspects as she withdraws within a rigidly demarcated private sphere. Aboulela's fiction adds nuance and complexity to the representation of Islam and Muslims, particularly the lives of Muslim minorities in Europe and

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North America, while exposing prejudice, racism, and Islamophobia. Muslim immigrant literature represents a significant departure from postcolonial African fiction, which often portrayed religion as a problem or part of a crisis.

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