

## Review

## Translating silence, transmitting faith: Personal and cultural understanding in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

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The protagonist in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* moves into contested and controversial territory through a new and shifting state of engagement – one might say entanglement – with Western culture. Far from capitulating to cultural domination, the protagonist dances with it, ultimately taking the lead in a creative process of forming a new hybrid vocabulary of experience and meaning. This process in Aboulela's novel is examined with reference to feminist and postcolonial criticism and a comparison to traditional storytelling tropes, including that of the romance and the heroic cycle as described by Joseph Campbell. One Arthurian legend, that of the Fisher King, provides a comparison and a pathway to understanding the subtle transformation of the East/West relationship in Aboulela's novel.

**Key words:** Translator, Aboulela's novel, cultural domination.

### INTRODUCTION

Female postcolonial writers face multiple obstacles in expressing authentic viewpoints to a multicultural world, yet, despite having to face down racial, cultural, and gender-based privilege, they repeatedly meet the challenge of devising new forums of identity and voice in which nothing can be taken for granted. Resistance to cultural domination is often the starting point for these writers; however, when resistance and the subversion of norms is effected in particularly creative ways, and when the author and her subject move beyond resistance into a creative state that encourages new alliances and transcendent understanding, the achievement is particularly noteworthy. A reflection on Leila Aboulela's achievement of these aims in her 1999 work *The Translator* reveals her ability to form a new hybrid vocabulary of experience and meaning while both engaging with and resisting orientalist tropes. Through a close textual examination of the work within the context of feminist and postcolonial criticism, as well as the application of legendary motives

and narrative cycles, the author intends to present an evaluation and characterization of her contribution to the genre.

*The Translator* tells the story of a romance between a Sudanese translator of Islamic texts and the Scottish scholar for whom she works. Admittedly, several aspects of the story are conventional – it is a romance with an ultimately happy outcome, with intimations of traditional English works – but at the same time, it also contains a dramatic reversal of existing cultural domination and is an uncompromising (though compassionate) instance of a woman's 'writing back' to both colonialism and postcolonial concepts. Aboulela radically reprises the Orientalist as described by Edward Said, offering a novel interpretation of the hunger that eats away at him and a simple and direct solution. Through her subject matter she also explores the true power of translation – the building of a bridge between cultures and people which has the ability to bring about the healing of deficiencies

and wounds – and then subtly takes us beyond the mere functionality of a minority culture within a dominant one, into a more radical state of pluralism. Said's (1994) Orientalism is certainly a consideration for Aboulela, the difference being that her character and narrative do not reject the Orientalist, but seek to help him. Similarly, Aboulela's protagonist Sammar does not reject the patriarchal subtext of the romance story, but leads the reader far beyond it through a close and compassionate examination of the male position. According to Gayatri Spivak, female postcolonial writers are threatened with effacement on the basis of both their culture and their gender:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow... "(Spivak, (1988) "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 28).

Given these challenges, it is clear that Aboulela's protagonist Sammar plays a dangerous game in her relationship with the Orientalist, associating herself so intimately with the very tropes that compose the colonialist narrative and the patriarchal romance. At the same time, the author herself takes similar risks, flirting with forms and narrative elements that could push her voice underground. The narrative structure of Aboulela's novel and the portrayal of the characters depend, to a great degree, on the traditional narrative and patriarchal romance, whereas the author's ability to 'write back' to colonialism depends on her ability to powerfully subvert them. Thus, very fundamental question regarding this narrative, its intentions and its success immediately asserts itself: can the writer and the character who acts as her mouthpiece effectively navigate through the intrinsic messages put forward by a recognizably Western form? Can she closely associate herself with them, and yet not be subjugated by them? Is this one way in which the subaltern can speak?

It is common in both colonial and postcolonial narratives for the hybrid female character to be seeking some sort of respite from culturally-based repression. Thus, to facilitate a conclusion to such crises through cultural mixing, cross-cultural romances are not uncommon. However, their conclusion, according to Spivak, is very often that "white men save brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1988; 93). In this way, a new equilibrium with apparent liminality is achieved, albeit at the expense of aspects of the woman's intrinsic identity. In *The Translator*, however, this convention is reversed. Far from being the 'rescuer' of an oppressed Muslim woman, Rae, the white male 'Orientalist' is himself acutely in need of

rescue, which the woman is able and willing to provide. Moreover, as a translator, she is rather more proficient and capable in the multicultural setting than Rae is. Aboulela gives us a character who is culturally bilingual and able to help others to be so, given her role as a translator, yet deeply rooted in her own culture of origin, and it is the Western male how must make the adjustments and join her where she stands, more for his own benefit than for her own. There is a gentle but profound subversion of the colonial romance, a truly hybrid tale with elements of Western storytelling within Aboulela's own Muslim worldview.

The relationship between the western man and the eastern woman has been eroticized literature many times in literature. Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (and the critique of it presented by David Hwang's *M. Butterfly*) represents the archetype. The economic and romantic systems, discourses and structures within which Rae and Sammar exist form a tangible construct, strengthened through repetition, which unequivocally houses these characters. It is from inside this structure that Aboulela, through her character, must speak, knowing that the message will be both amplified (because of its ready acceptability to western readers) and hampered by the structure.

Sammar is, of course, vulnerable to subjugation on the basis of gender and of culture, which the author consistently battles. One might question whether it is troubling that she does so seemingly without challenging traditional male/female gender role binaries as they play out in an everyday context. As a translator, Sammar is a highly skilled and essential handmaiden to the intellectual elites, rather than one of their higher ranks. However, the role is not without its own power.

### The importance of translation

Initially, translation is the dynamic through which cultural differences are spanned and communication occurs; however, the nature of this communication is not immediately transformative. Challenges must be overcome before it becomes so. Sammar is, first and foremost, identified as a 'translator'; this is a position that carries its own innate power in the postcolonial and multicultural setting. A translator is one who straddles linguistic worlds, having power over multiple domains and assists others in finding their way between them. At the same time, a translator, or the need for a translator, speaks to the presence of a breach. The need for a translator can be read as a deficiency, as the translator is there to bridge an existing gap.

These are the loaded social connotations of a professional role that has, arguably, existed and remained constant for as long as separate and distinct languages and customs have existed in our world. While the translator may be seen to have a subservient or custodial role – never the creator of meaning, but always the

purveyor of others' meaning – the role is also vital, as a glue that holds cultures together. Nadia Butt discusses the irony of Aboulela's title, given the "untranslatability" of Islam as presented in the novel, and this point is well taken. There are aspects of culture and religion that cannot be translated or accurately transmitted from one culture to the other. At most, to gain understanding or union, one may attempt to transfer them wholesale. The consciousness of this untranslatability certainly permeates the novel, but is countered by what seems in contrast to be the essential optimism of the title and of the main character's role. Aboulela's character bravely attempts to build bridges where none exist, and in so doing she continuously strives to perform a thankless and ultimately largely fruitless task. The message is in the attempt, and in the occasions on which she gives it up and opts for a more powerful form of cultural transfer.

It is in the nature of the role of the translator that she speaks – her very essence is communication – and yet she has no mandate to use her own words. Yet, improbably, this is the perfect forum and structure for Aboulela's distinctive exploration of the Muslim woman's voice. The translator may not have free reign in designing a message, but she has full control over its delivery. It is her skill that bends the words; she picks and chooses what to include and what to omit, which precise configuration of words can come closest to faithfully transmitting the desired message. The translator can be deliberate or unconscious with regard to these choices; that is, they can display the translator's will or her socially constructed identity, and provide a subtle forum for both, even though the assumed objective might be to obscure or obliterate both. A translator, like an editor, has the assumed objective of clarifying the original writer's words and 'bringing out' his message; however, when a wide disparity in culture or language makes this improbable, the translator must step into the breach.

At this point in the analysis, let us leave the author and her character on the very brink of speech and turn our attention to an alternate view – one which does not seek to negate the previous analysis or the established structure within which Rae and Sammar find themselves, but which does complicate it. Viewed from a slightly different angle, the story is altered, perhaps taking on the very characteristics of the story that the characters are telling to themselves and to each other. Ultimately, this story has the power not only to overturn the colonial power dynamic within which it is situated, but to effect and explicate change by conquering the two problematic elements originally introduced, namely, Rae's persistent illness and Sammar's own compulsive silence.

### **Eastern and Western Storytelling; its Tropes, Form, Structure and Audience**

At a narrative and a textual level, postcolonial literature

written in English is almost of necessity a hybrid, incorporating elements of the canon of English literature which have, in many cases, influenced the author during his or her English language and cultural education. Aboulela, educated in England, certainly incorporates English literary elements as well as conveying a Muslim identity. Stemming from dual sources, much of post-colonial literature conveys its message from a stance of liminality, informed by both English and Middle Eastern literature, often containing themes and narrative aspects of both, and thus inevitably mediating or negotiating between them. The degree to which this process is conscious on the part of the author, of course, varies. In some cases, the author mixes the English language with distinctly Eastern storytelling tropes; in other cases, the narrative structure is similar to that of the English novel, as it has been conceived since its beginning, one predominant form being the *bildungsroman*, another the romance.

The latter is an affirmation of life, but it is an affirmation of culture, which can often lead to a reassertion of the predominance of a particularly Western culture. For this reason, it may be argued that a tragic ending – one in which the immigrant is unable to resolve differences between the self and the larger society – is an authentic and realistic expression of the difficulties inherent in cultural mixing, whereas a conventionally romantic ending may appear to force a resolution. Of course, in the case of both tragedy and romance, the author has the power and agency to convey a new message based on a self-conscious retelling or writing back to a familiar form. The act of writing in English, for a postcolonial author, assumes that the readership will be primarily Western. At the same time, this very knowledge makes the act of twisting and altering tropes in the 'writing back' process more pointed and more potent.

Aboulela's novel is, at its most basic level, a cross-cultural romance. It is a love story between two subjects of different cultures, culminating in their coming together. Just as a romantic story, traditionally culminating in a marriage, inevitably re-affirms life and the continuation of society (where the characters marrying are members of the same culture), the cross-cultural marriage, unless it involves assimilation into the western culture can be read as an affirmation of multiculturalism, of the hybridity between cultures, and of "new blood" coming in from across borders and boundaries to supplement existing strains. The cross-cultural marriage or successful love union is, at least potentially, transformative, in that it changes forever the former entrenchment within culture.

### **The Heroic Cycle and Cross-Cultural Desire**

The romance genre in general intersects significantly with another common (perhaps trans-cultural) narrative structure, the heroic cycle. Joseph Campbell, in his work *Hero*

*With a Thousand Faces*, brought into focus the truly universal nature of this story, in which a hero answers a call to adventure, rescues a maiden, and goes beyond the boundaries of his own society in order to bring back something of value<sup>1</sup>. It is the storyline that was in evidence in the Holy Grail legends, and, of course, long before and after. It would be argued here that it has a particular resonance with Orientalism and the intersection of eastern and western values and culture, just as it resonates with and is commonly combined with the romance trope. Deliberately or otherwise, Aboulela integrates elements of the heroic cycle into her narrative, and it is here that her subversion of conventions becomes most profound and significant. In the roots of Western storytelling, the hero who goes 'beyond' his own society or domain is going into an area otherwise unknown by those in his society. In the Grail legends, this action is applied to an eastern/western binary; the heroic knights were travelling into the "levant", orient, or middle east, to a "Holy Land" beyond their own domain to which they nevertheless claimed intimacy and ownership, in order to retrieve a lost treasure. This treasure was, moreover, so important to them that it became a type of obsession. Was this, indeed, as Edward Said (1994) suggests, the original Orientalism, a compulsion to look east in order to find (or construct) a 'lost' part of oneself?

If so, Aboulela's character, Rae suffers profoundly from it. His suffering, indeed, is so persistent and seemingly intractable that it calls to mind a related legend, that of the Fisher King. It is an unusual feature of Aboulela's narrative, and therefore one worth 'unpacking', that the male 'hero' in the romance is constantly ill, suffering, yearning, and crying out for healing from the east. The theme of illness is established early and repeated consistently. Often, it is associated specifically with the West – the harsh winter wasteland, the damp climate which aggravates Rae's asthma, and the statement that "loneliness is Europe's malaria", hinting at psychological origins of illness (Aboulela 103). Rae's illness is only resolved when he joins Sammar in Khartoum, his symptoms being physical, psychological, cultural, and spiritual. Time has passed since the colonial era, and in that time, the Orientalist has become sick. There is a general air of decay and the passing of better days that lingers around colonialism. With the objective of pointing out the eternal beauty of nature, Aboulela described, in contrast, the decrepit appearance of a British hotel:

The hotel was built by the British in colonial times. It once glittered and ruled. Now it was a crumbling sleepy place, tolerant of rats and with showers that didn't work (Aboulela 202)

Rae himself is too full of fresh yearning to be "crumbling" and "tolerant". Nevertheless, like the British hotel, he is infected by a kind of degeneration or illness. Whereas social positioning in the colonial relationship would lead

to the assumption that he is strong, it becomes undeniable that he is not. Rather, Rae is beset by multiple vulnerabilities. Speaking to Sammar on the phone, visiting his ex-in-laws at Christmas, Rae is becoming ill, developing the flu, which later leads to pneumonia, hospitalization and prolonged incapacitation. The story he relates during these phone calls highlights his vulnerability and connects it specifically to the East. Because we learn of his illness at the same time as we learn of these misfortunes, they are linked within the reader's mind, and seem to belong to an overall matrix of suffering within which Rae lives. Travelling to Morocco with friends as a youth, Rae was drawn to the place and its culture more powerfully than either of his companions, and was, simultaneously, beset by random misfortunes. For obscure reasons, he was:

*... more in awe, more wretched than they. He felt stale and unclean, with is shirt torn and his hair covered in dust...(Aboulela 55)*

The pattern is repeated throughout the years, and Rae appears a glutton for punishment, compelled to keep returning to the East to repeat uncomfortable experiences:

*... A pattern was set from that first time. In years to come every arrival to Africa was similarly accompanied by loss or pain, a blow to his pride. Baggage disappearing, nights spent in quarantine, stolen traveller's cheques. As if from him the continent demanded a forfeit, a repayment of debts from the ghosts of the past" (Aboulela 55).*

Rae is not a mere traveller or visitor; he is driven to establish a personal presence and identity in the East. He has a "still-born son in Morocco" (Aboulela 59), a tragic and abbreviated attempt to join himself genetically with the place. The most telling aspect of this summary of Rae's experiences is that he chooses or is compelled to continuously return. The Islamic world has an attraction for him that his string of misfortunes cannot offset. He returns continuously as the association with the place seems to abuse him further and further. He wants something from the place that it stubbornly refuses to yield to him. The physical description of this character implies an inherent, but possibly inauthentic, liminality. He reminds Sammar of home; he meets with her, initially, in the ironically named "Winter Garden", which mimics a warmer clime and is inappropriate for the actual landscape in which it is located. Even his appearance is such that "... he could easily pass for a Turk or a Persian" (6). The stillborn promise that his appearance and his continuous attempts to come to the east entail is fulfilled at the end of the narrative, when Rae joins Sammar in Sudan. This text examines the tropes or romantic fiction by allocating Rae as the one to be 'saved' by the relationship, his long search and suffering finally resolved, while in other aspects those same tropes are confirmed by the fact that Sammar, likewise, finds the resolution to her past and present conflicts within this new marriage.

<sup>1</sup> This basic storyline is deemed by Campell to be universal, consisting of consistent narrative elements; he calls it the "monomyth".

What is the illness that afflicts the Orientalist and the colonialist in Aboulela's narrative? It appears to be composed in equal parts of decay and of unrequited longing. In the wake of the demise of the strongly held colonial position, the Orientalist, as represented by Rae, appears hungry, damaged and unfulfilled. Rae's constant returns to the East, despite hardships that leave him at a disadvantage, connote a need for something that can only be found there. To the degree that the dominant West needs the 'weaker' East, and the male needs the female, deficiency of such a counterpoint might, of course, lead to a disintegration of the Orientalist's core self-perceived identity, and might lead to a weakness that can be metaphorically expressed as illness.

### The Fisher King

Despite his seemingly dominant social position, Rae's vulnerability is not an illusion. Rae is, in fact, perpetually bereft, beset by one disability after another in a constant stream. He is driven to wander and search, as though for a missing part of himself, even though the search itself afflicts him with further wounds. In this aspect, and keeping in mind the ancient and traditional antecedents of modern heroic and romantic tales, the character's plight is strongly suggestive of the Arthurian legend of the Fisher King, who is afflicted by a 'wound that never heals'. This legend has been passed down in fragmentary form and has several variations, with certain consistent elements. First, the Fisher King comes from a barren land, representing the barrenness of his life. Second, he is the keeper of the Holy Grail. Third, he is afflicted by a painful wound for which there is no cure, and finally, he is saved by the deceptively simple intervention of a young knight. The question is very simple in nature and involves an overture toward the king, an invitation for him to express his true feelings or disclose what is ailing him. In some cases he is also healed by merely lying beside the Grail, the symbol that that West so profoundly craves. In some cases, in fact, he is healed by lying by the Grail by a flowing river, a fair approximation of Rae's position at the resolution of the narrative, a point that will be clarified subsequently. As we shall see, versions of all the basic elements of this legend are reproduced in Aboulela's story, which is not to suggest that Aboulela deliberately invokes it. Rather, legends of this type have become so disseminated throughout literature and culture that it is very possible to retain echoes of them without having that explicit intention; nevertheless, in this case, enough elements of the story remain intact that we can use it as a context for the deeper understanding of elements of Aboulela's narrative and ultimate message. Fittingly, some scholars are of the opinion that "... the Fisher King is an amalgam, initially appearing in the wake of the Third Crusade, developed as a means for fusing the colliding Occidental and Oriental cultures" (Birchwood 2002; 34). In other words, the story itself may be fundamentally and

archetypically hybrid.

In the legends, the Fisher King is closely associated with the Holy Grail; in most cases he is the keeper of that foundational aspect of the East-West dynamic and of Orientalism itself. The Grail, thought to have held Christ's blood, and therefore the most sacred artefact of Western religion, was 'lost' to the 'Holy Lands' – the Middle East. In history as well as in legend, the retrieval of the 'Holy Lands' and the Grail formed at least a partial objective and rationalization for the Crusades, arguably setting the tone for East/West relationships. The concept of something valuable or intrinsic that had been 'lost' to the East and must be regained is of course a persistent one which echoes the desire of the Orientalist and of Rae. The perceived need to 'recapture' the Grail and the Holy Lands echoes precisely the desire of the Orientalist to regain or retain an essential part of himself – something belonging fundamentally to him – by forays into the East. The Fisher King, however, while partaking in this quest for an elixir from the East, also differs in one critical sense from most of those engaged in it – namely, in most of the legends, he is already in possession of the Grail. However, his proximity to it only seems to increase his suffering, although, in some versions of the legend, his suffering is also alleviated when he lies beside the Grail. In his role as Fisher King, Rae craves, and strives again and again to acquire, some elixir from the east. As in the case of the Fisher King, the fact that the wound itself was acquired on a foray into the east does not diminish his desire for it – in fact, it may enhance it, as he tries again and again to regain a missing part of himself. Moreover, his proximity to that elixir – in this case, arguably, Sammar herself – might alleviate, but does not immediately resolve his suffering.

Ultimately, the resolution to his plight comes when a stranger – a young and naïve knight called Perceval<sup>2</sup> – asks the "Grail question(s)", a deceptively simple query or set of queries, sometime used to suggest that Perceval is a 'fool'. In all versions of the tale, he has been raised outside of society and is therefore able to ask questions that no other member of society can. Generally, he must make more than one attempt to hit upon the correct question. For example, in Chretien de Troyes' (1988) *The Story of Percival*, Percival is blamed for his mother's death (much as Sammar's aunt blames her for her son's death) and for failing to ask the correct questions, much as Sammar comes to blame herself for what she feels was a selfish request that Rae convert to Islam. This precipitates a period of exile – like Sammar's alienation from Rae – preceding the final resolution (de Troyes 1988: 194, 209, 261).

The Grail questions themselves, although all-important, are obscure in most versions of the legend – sometimes they are referred to without being explicitly stated. Nevertheless, it is clear that these questions are what

<sup>2</sup> There are several alternative spellings such as 'Percival' and 'Parsifal'

cause the healing. In Wolfram von Eschenbach's version, the Grail question is simply "What troubles you?" after which Perceval turns to the Grail itself and asks "How can I serve thee?" The essence of these questions is that of a compassionate and empathic overture – a remarkable aspect of a legend originating from a time long preceding an understanding of psychology and the importance of empathic listening! The deeper significance may be, perhaps, the need for cross-cultural understanding. In asking of the Grail "How can I serve thee?", Perceval is ending the contested ownership of it, and acknowledging that human effort is needed to forge the necessary ties. In asking "What troubles you?", Perceval is likewise looking for understanding of the plight of the other rather than assuming a culturally based authority.

A version of this legend was the inspiration for a film by the same title, in which the original story was told as follows, differing from most versions in that the King was not initially in possession of the Grail. An attempt to gain it by seizing it prematurely from a fire leaves him "terribly wounded":

Now, as this boy grew older, his wound grew deeper, until one day, life for him lost its reason. He had no faith in any man, not even himself; he couldn't love or feel loved; he was sick with experience—he began to die. One day a fool wandered into the castle and found the king alone. Now, being a fool, he was simple-minded. He didn't see a king—he only saw a man alone and in pain. And he asked the king, "what ails you, friend?" The king replied, "I'm thirsty. I need some water to cool my throat." So the fool took a cup from beside his bed, filled it with water, and handed it to the king. As the king began to drink he realized that his wound was healed. He looked in his hands and there was the Holy Grail—that which he had sought all of his life. He turned to the fool and said with amazement, "How could you find that which my brightest and bravest could not?" The fool replied, "I don't know. I only knew that you were thirsty."<sup>3</sup>

It would of course be incongruous to cast the character Sammar in the role of a 'fool'; however, the true significance of Perceval is that he is able to offer a fresh perspective, and to move beyond entrenched viewpoints into fresh understanding. Perceval is not awed by the status of the king just as Sammar is not intimidated by the culturally superior role of the white male. Instead, she communes with him while offering a different perspective on aspects of his life, and giving him both fresh knowledge and instinctive compassion. Further similarities abound; for example, a dream that Rae relates is very reminiscent of the legendary tale as it specifically evokes both a knight's equipment and the feeling of perpetual incapacitation. Sammar, offering him a drink, is his

salvation:

'I went into a room full of smoke, a lot of smoke but when I checked there was no fire. When I left the room, the handle of my sword broke. I held it broken in my hands and knew that it could never be mended, it could never be reliable again. This was a terrible loss, I didn't know why, but I had the feeling of deep loss because I had to go on without the sword' (Aboulela 95 – 96).

Subsequently, Rae describes searching through many rooms of a house, finally encountering Sammar cooking, and she gives him a glass of milk: "I drank it, I drank it all. I didn't mind" (Aboulela 96). Similarly, when he is ill, the soup that Sammar makes for Rae is, he asserts, his cure, "... the catalyst that made him recover", though Sammar is quick to state that "Allah is the one who heals" (Aboulela 102). Elsewhere, Sammar tells Rae that Islam itself "... would be good for you, it will make you stronger" (Aboulela 89).

After Sammar leaves for Khartoum, estranged, for the moment, from Rae, elements of his previous illnesses and incapacitation while traveling intensifies. He describes himself as being in a state that closely resembles the plight of the Fisher King, having "...no faith in any man, not even himself; he couldn't love or feel loved; he was sick with experience—he began to die". Rae describes missing a plane, misreading a gate number, and the combination of these stresses making him unable to breathe – as a traveller, he is obviously incapacitated, an affliction that has followed him throughout his life. Coming to be with Sammar, following his conversion to Islam, however, Rae finally overcomes his old difficulties regarding travel, and his transition between continents, despite a broken conveyor belt, was "the smoothest trip I have ever done... it must be because my intention is good" (Aboulela 195).

### The Role of Islam

Islam, of course, is a component of that healing, giving Rae a purpose, a centre, "balance", and "dignity" (Aboulela 198 -99). To Aboulela, this is a central part of the message, so much so that the author would very likely object, much as Sammar objects, to the notion that she is Rae's salvation. Rather, she is the vehicle through which Rae loses his objectivity – which for him, as established, is a form of social and economic power, through his role in the academic world – and embraces Islam. In Sammar's own words, "Allah is the one who heals" (Aboulela 102), and Islam itself is presented as a cure for the lonely and disconnected Westerner. Nevertheless, these ideas are introduced within the structure of a romantic and heroic tale, one whose narrative and implicit and explicit messages are closely tied to the idea that one person can be the salvation of another. We must question, therefore, whether there is a contradiction. Does religion exist merely as a subtext of the romantic

<sup>3</sup> Source: *The Fisher King*. Dir. Terry Gilliam. Screenplay by Richard LaGravenese. Prod. Debra Hill and Lynda Obst. Music by George Fenton. Tri-Star Pictures, 1991.

story? Or, conversely, is the romantic story a vehicle for the religious content? To the modern reader, it may appear as though there is a necessary separation between the two – between the secular story and the religious one. However, as Aboulela herself implies, even within Western culture, this separation is a modern innovation, not part of traditional storytelling.

In an interview, Aboulela invites an understanding of the centrality of Islam in her narrative by making the following comparison:

*I was often asked 'Why should Rae convert, why should religion be an obstacle...?' In my answer I would then fall back on Jane Eyre and say '... why can't Mr. Rochester be married to both Bertha and Jane?' In the same way that I, as a Muslim reader, respect and empathize with Jane's very Christian dilemma, I want Western/Christian readers to respect and empathize with Sammar's very Muslim dilemma (Aboulela cited by Stotesbury 31)*

Just as scholarship does not consider *Jane Eyre* to be primarily a Christian text, despite ample and pervasive Christian content, the insistence upon Islamic values in Aboulela's text should not be viewed as inconsistent with or separate from the fundamental story. Neither does the story obscure it. Just as Christian content is an accepted component of the nineteenth century novel because it had a deep and immediate personal relevance for characters, writers and readers alike, Islam is inextricable from other aspects of Aboulela's worldview, and co-exists easily with the story, neither dominating it nor hiding within it. At the same time, it can easily be conceived of as a source of empowerment. Her adherence to Islam is both the cause and the means of Sammar's cultural resistance to Rae, and ultimately his transformation. In *The Politics of Feminism in Islam*, Majid Anouar (1998) states that "...a progressive Islam" in which women enjoy equal rights and status is a powerful vehicle for breaking way from Eurocentric culture and societal structures in order to "... redynamize progressive non-Western traditions in a genuinely multicultural world" (Anouar 103). This view of Islam is a central component of postcolonial feminism.

The novel, therefore, contains rich perspectives on Islam which in no way intrude upon the basic story, but are an intrinsic part of it. Sammar's views of Islam are woven into the narrative, central to the protagonist's worldview, and enlightening to the western reader. Sammar says to Rae that Islam will make him stronger, noting that it was, traditionally, a religion of oppressed people. Geoffrey Nash notes that "... hybridity and acculturation are the main features of the Islam that both protagonists [in *The Translator* and *Minaref*] adopt (Nash 2002).

On the other hand, there is an undeniable spiritual purity in Sammar's conception of Islam which draws her away

from more personal or secular concerns, allowing her to transcend them, and thus bringing her a measure of peace. Sammar questions herself and her own motivations in asking Rae to convert, consciously renouncing her own concerns in the matter and focusing, instead, on Rae's own wellbeing. Sammar realizes that "... she had never, not once, prayed that he would become a Muslim for his own sake, for his own good. It had always been for herself, her need to get married again, not to be alone. If she could rise above that, she could clear her intentions" (Aboulela 175). Once Sammar does so, the religious content seems to peel itself away from the narrative, becoming not a manifestation of any character's need or desire but something on a higher and more spiritual plane. The views expressed by Sammar are very consistent with Aboulela's own, as expressed in interviews. For the author, a personal religious identity provides more stability than national identity, as, she states, "I can carry [religion] with me wherever I go, whereas the other things can easily be taken away from me" (Interview with Anita Sethi, the Guardian 2005).

### Overcoming Silence

Along with the tropes of the traditional romance and the heroic journey to rescue the Fisher King, Aboulela's narrative is also, and not less powerfully, the story of a woman's overcoming her own silence and finding her voice. To some degree, the story of Rae is indeed 'translated' and presented through the dominant viewpoint of Sammar; however, hidden within this drama is another, less linear, more subtle and more obscure. Sammar's own silence and the narratives that emerge from them are vital components of the story, the movement from silence to fragmented disclosure to (seemingly) full voice and agency represents the growth of a voice and of social participation. Initially, the style of Sammar's communication is as noteworthy as the content, if far more ambiguous.

The fact that Sammar, as a translator, is so intrinsically adept at communication, a transmitter of cross-cultural concepts and values, almost obscures the fact of her initial commitment to silence. Sammar is, initially, imprisoned within an inability to speak of her own lived experience. In particular, despite her regard for Rae, she shields him from her former life by not speaking of it, or by doing so only in small, careful pieces. Sammar's silence or perceived need for silence, introduced almost immediately into the narrative, is both cultural and gendered. As a cultural outsider, she is conscious of the need to remove or skim away elements of discourse that would be incomprehensible or disturbing to the Westerner, and most specifically, to Rae. As touched upon earlier, this same tendency is reinforced by Sammar's seemingly powerful and empowering professional role, introducing a paradox: by being the universal

communicator, capable of mediating between cultural narratives, Sammar must necessarily silence a component of their content in order to ensure understanding. Sammar's silence, however, encompasses both the cultural and the deeply personal. Her perceived need to silence herself is one of two challenges that need to be overcome during the course of the novel. Appropriately enough, it is by far the quieter of the two challenges, and comprises a strong but subtle subtext that accompanies the more dominant narrative feature - healing Rae's perpetual and seemingly intractable suffering.

The role of the translator has already been examined; let us add here that, although a translator is, quintessentially, a communicator, the content she communicates can never be her own. At the same time, she must use her intelligence and her hybrid knowledge to shape it, effecting translucence and transmission where, previously, only opaqueness can have existed. This is done by a process of 'grooming' and arranging the material, knowing what to include and what to leave out, aware, always, of the effects of the finished material on its reader. It is in this way that Sammar trims and 'translates' her own life experiences for Rae's consumption, sifting away what is undesirable and leaving him with an image of a reality that he can understand, that is never indigestible or 'too much', too obscure, or too raw. Perhaps fundamental to the translator's work is that no manuscript it ever 'raw' once she finishes with it, but has been rendered fit for consumption. Fittingly, then, Sammar uses a cooking metaphor when contemplating her own silence. She states that her intrusive thoughts and words are like the "froth" that forms when she makes chicken soup, and must be "lifted away" before the soup can be served (Aboulela 7). At times, she makes a concerted effort to do away with this 'froth', to push it down, to suppress it and keep it from taking over the dish. Indeed, she believes that the dish would be inedible were it to be included.

The 'froth', for Sammar, consists of her former life, her husband, the child she has left at home, her relationship with her aunt - in other words, almost the whole of her emotional and familial past. It is 'froth' because it bubbles up unbidden as a side-effect of her artistry, and because it cannot be served up, but must be removed or omitted. At the same time, calling it 'froth' carries inevitable and automatic connotations of something light, unsubstantial, and above all unimportant - remarkable statements indeed when one considers the weighty nature of this 'froth'. There is an odd irony here - something 'frothy' is, generally, light, airy or bubbly. A woman's concerns may indeed be judged by the dominant male society to be 'frothy', but if so, they would be sweet, airy and inconsequential. Sammar's 'froth', by contrast, is anything but, consisting as it does of some of the most profound dramas of human existence. However, these are incongruously dubbed 'froth'; the element that is superfluous, an inevitable result of the process of cooking

(designed to promote nourishment and healing) but something that must be, and moreover can be, cleared away and disposed of, so that it doesn't mar the soup. In much the same way, Sammar as a translator clarifies elements of prose, "moulding Arabic into English" and leaving a finished product that is "transparent like a pane of glass" (167). As readers, are we to be troubled by the self-effacing element of this approach, and by the fact that Sammar views the words that come bubbling up within her as superfluous? Indeed, it is, perhaps, incongruous that a woman who is so assertive about her needs, willing to promote a viewpoint that is and prepared to live without the man she loves.

The content of this 'froth', which Sammar herself feels to be extraneous to her communication with Rae, consists of her previous life, her family, and her marriage. Wishing to obliterate this past and to "... make a gift of [her]self, a child to be moulded" (Aboulela 7) is, perhaps, motivated by personal pain rather than the awareness of cultural differences. Indeed, it becomes apparent that Sammar's aunt, who is also her mother-in-law, is extremely hostile, perhaps abusive, toward Sammar. Upon her returning home to Khartoum, her intelligence, her professionalism, and her moral character are brought sharply and harshly into question by this aunt, whom she seems to fear. Her memories of her husband appear flimsy and fragile, indeed like froth that constantly reasserts itself only to dissipate. As the narrative progresses, we come to understand that she feels a measure of the same guilt imposed on her by her aunt for his demise, which is in itself weakly associated with life in the West. It is because Sammar desires a car, fundamental equipment for life in the first world, that her husband is killed, and his mother holds Sammar directly responsible. Yet, if Sammar feels that her association with the West has been fundamentally harmful or regrettable, this is not a part of the message that Aboulela highlights, focusing instead on the personal trauma and damage to her psychological identity that Sammar has suffered. Interestingly, she also seems willing and determined to transcend this subjugated self without the help of Rae, and her joy when he resurfaces near the end of the narrative has, arguably, little to do with dependence or the need for rescue and everything to do with love. Sammar has, following her return, faced down the demons that lurk in association with her past and has paved the way for a peaceable co-existence with her family, her primary solace, in Rae's absence, being the deeply spiritual awareness of the meaning of her religion and culture. A lovely description of Ramadan offers a possibility of peaceful relationships with her family in close proximity to her spiritual core.

As mentioned, Sammar's silence is also intimately connected to her role as a translator, someone who must bend language in such a way that the original meaning is transmitted and a polished version of it, ultimately, is shared. Rae's and Sammar's professional roles as



transmitters and purveyors of Muslim culture to western scholarship are matched and resonant with one another; Rae requires processed pieces of Muslim texts so that he may do his work, but his detachment, which Sammar accuses him of in one passage, is absolutely necessary; Yasmin states that, for Rae, converting to Islam would be “professional suicide” (200) because he would then no longer be detached and neutral. Of course, the notion of neutrality itself must be challenged. Neutrality implies an absence of cultural bias, but, it is very apparent that this neutrality in fact is a bias toward a western liberal and secular worldview. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak states that supposedly universal values are inevitably biased to reflect a dominant culture, and thus only appear universal to those who practice them. The alternative to this closed view is a commitment to postmodern knowledge, where a plurality of views is both inevitable and prized. Within such plurality, the detached and objective position is no longer tenable as it implies non-participation. Religion itself contains plural views, and this is also an important component of the message that the author transmits. We see this early on in Sammar’s assessment of terrorist threats as immature, based as they are on an uncompromising fundamentalist viewpoint, very distinct from her own religious sense. The proper response to fundamentalism and terrorism is not to eschew religion but to take a softer and more personal view of it, a view which is potentially inclusive, and possibly adaptable. In the course of translation, Sammar mentions a set of sacred texts, revelations to a prophet, that are, at least potentially, universally accessible: Unlike the Holy Qur’an, Sacred Hadith are not ... forbidden to be touched or read by one who is in a state of ritual impurity ... and they are not characterized by the attribute of inimitability (Aboulela 42).

Symbolically, then, the Sacred Hadith carry the possibility of supporting cultural hybridity through inclusion – in this way, and through Rae’s conversion, Islam itself is presented as one of a range of valid spiritual paths for the world’s people. As Nash notes, the potential for hybridity in Aboulela’s conception of Islam makes it both appealing and powerful (Nash, 2007). The aim is not evangelism or a promotion of immutable values, but the possibility of participation in a living and continuously relevant faith.

### **Moving beyond Legend**

Despite the similarities with the Fisher King legendary cycle and the importance of such for understanding the need of the West for the East, a need that is more subtle and personal than Said’s Orientalism allows for, the striking differences between Aboulela’s novel and the legendary cycle are also noteworthy; indeed, the narrative itself highlights them. If Rae’s character is one that has a precedent in older tales, Sammar herself is realistic and

innovative, violating the stereotype of the woman in need of rescue as well as that of the naïve ‘fool’ who unwittingly asks the correct questions. Aboulela points out that the wounded West cannot be healed through naïveté or through acquisition of a symbolic artefact. In a sense, she pulls down the whole façade of the Grail legend cycle, exposing the oversimplification and unrealistic expectations that hide within the essential opposition of East and West that support it. This also necessitates an end or resolution to Sammar’s own silence. The stories have parallel or interlocking arcs; Sammar is a dynamic character just as Rae is, and must search for her own parallel resolution. Despite the overall romantic structure, it would be a great disservice to this story to state that she is merely the receiver of rescue by the male.

Rather, the heroic/romantic tale is turned upside down as the female rescues the male, and an entry into Eastern religious values and culture brings resolution to the Western male, who, despite plans to return to Aberdeen, appears content to stay in Khartoum and remarks that it is has cured his asthma. Rather than bringing back his bride like a prize, to enrich Rae’s own society and culture, the narrative is concluded in Sudan and plans to return are vague. Rae himself is transformed, and loses that most valuable attribute of the Western Orientalist, his core, culturally imposed identity, in order to forever embody the position of the ‘other’. As a Western man who has converted to Islam, Rae will now be the ‘other’ wherever he goes, in Europe or in the Middle East. He is unmistakably hybrid. He is, in a sense, repeating, in reverse, the journey of the Asian immigrant to the Western world. Most notably, in the case of Rae, this journey is a fulfillment, a happy resolution to all the aborted and stillborn journeys to the east that he had previously undertaken. Dictionary definitions of *translation* include the following:

*a uniform movement without rotation; change of location, travel - a movement through space that changes the location of something; shift, displacement - an event in which something is displaced without rotation; the act of changing in form or shape or appearance, as in "a photograph is a translation of a scene onto a two-dimensional surface.*

In this sense, Sammar does not translate merely the Islamic texts that Rae needs in order to undertake his work, but arguably ‘translates’ the man himself. As an instance of writing back to colonialism, the, then, Aboulela’s inherent message is very radical. The dominant position of Western liberalism is profoundly challenged, and it is here, precisely, that Aboulela’s work differs so greatly from that of her contemporaries. The identity of postcolonial writers and their ability to speak and be heard - in essence, their ability to write back – has been interrogated, most notably by Spivak, who famously questioned whether the ‘subaltern’ could, in fact, speak,

or whether they are spoken for by Western scholars. Once the voices of these subaltern are presented to the Western public and academia, Spivak argues, they have already been irrevocably altered, and infected with Western values. By the same token, the voices of Middle Eastern authors living and working in England, such as Salman Rushdie, have been dubbed “third world cosmopolitan” writers on the grounds that their identity, perceptions and concerns are profoundly different and distinct from a true representation of Middle Eastern or Islamic values (Brennan). For example, while Rushdie expands upon the difficulty of the liminal position, he writes from the perspective of one how has evolved past or lost a close identification with his cultural roots. Aboulela, on the other hand, reasserts these roots and the possibility of their successful coexistence with the Westerner, with no need for the subjugation of either.

After receiving the news that Rae has converted to Islam, Sammar, also, transcends her former self by taking a step beyond the professional activity that has, thus far, supported her movement across cultures. She moves beyond translating and beyond silence, into a joyful pluralistic communication:

*She had an airmail pad with her, a ball-point pen, two envelopes. She was going to write two letters in two languages. They would say the same thing but would not be a translation. She wrote to Fareed first: long and cordial paragraphs, greetings, hoping that his wife and children were well, in good health... (190)*

To Rae, in order to say “the same thing”, she writes only a few lines: “*Please come and see me. Here is where I am...*” (190).

This is a significant concept. Here Aboulela’s conception of cultural translation is refined and circumscribed by its contrast with something better, a more targeted form of communication that will allow one to ‘say the same thing’ with such different words, in such a different context. What may be remarkable to the Western reader is not the simple, straightforward message to Rae, easily understandable; rather, it is the necessity of the first letter, an elaborate courtesy extended to a man she has never met but who had acted as Rae’s emissary. Addressing this man is familiar to her because of the commonality of culture, and it is for this reason that Rae’s communication to her through Fareed, the ‘miracle’ that transforms her life, is uniquely suited to bringing him closer to her. The essence of cross-cultural communication, then, is not translation, but multiplicity and the willingness and ability to enter into multiple norms. The achievement of the characters has been this opening of cross-cultural dialog beyond the scope of a translator or an Orientalist. The challenge is not becoming proficient in multiple languages but transforming oneself without losing one’s original or chosen self, becoming able to inhabit and embody multiple homes. It is an expansion

rather than a fragmentation of the self.

## Conclusion

Universality, in the end, cannot be achieved through universal conformity but only through a mutual and global acceptance of varied alternate positions. Aboulela states that her purpose as a writer is not to demonstrate the superiority of the East to the West, not “... to prove that Khartoum is nicer than London, more beautiful than Edinburgh” but to assert the intrinsic value of both (Aboulela, 2002 “Moving Away from Accuracy” 204). In her narrative, this same rejection of competition is contextualized within a striving for commonality that is based on transcendence rather than domination. It is, in itself, another of the cures that Sammar offers, originating from a Muslim perspective but not limited to it:

*Muslim doctors advised nervous people to look up at the sky. Forget the tight earth. Imagine the sky, all of it, belonged to them alone. Crescent, low moon, more stars than the eyes looking up at them. But the sky was free, without any price, no one I knew spoke of it, no one competed for it (45).*

A fine balance between this quintessentially universal view – that of the sky above- and a canny awareness of the social, political and religious influences that exist below aptly characterizes the spiritual and cultural messages in Aboulela’s novel. In the end, it is a unique and successful example of ‘writing back’, in which Orientalist and colonialist identities are grappled with and overcome, but never at the expense of the vulnerable personas behind them.

It is interesting to note that this novel was written prior to 9/11, during a period of time sometimes considered a golden age of multiculturalism in Britain. Could the same narrative have been written post-9/11? A comparison may be made to Fadia Faqir’s *My Name is Salma*, a narrative with broad similarities to *The Translator*. In both, a Muslim woman with a painful past comes to Britain, and falls in love with a Western man – an academic in both cases. Subsequently, the woman returns ‘home’ and confronts her past. Beyond these similarities, however, the stories are very different, as Faqir’s the vision is much darker and the cross-cultural differences irreconcilable and insurmountable. In Aboulela’s novel, those two poles, the Western and Eastern consciousness, reach gently, and ultimately with fulfillment, for one another. In view of the peace of innate conviction that permeates Aboulela’s optimistic narrative, it is possible to conclude that she would, indeed, have written such a narrative today, even following the hardening of polarized opinions and viewpoints regarding Islam and the West in the post-9/11 era. Indeed, one might argue that such narratives and their ability to ‘translate’ cultural biases, in the broad

sense, are needed more than ever.

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