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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Untranslatability and Cultural Encounters in Arab-Anglophone Literature: Leila Aboulela as a Case Study

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| ABSTRACT
Culture is not entirely translatable. Cultural meaning, however, is. Nevertheless, culture-bound terms and expressions, on the one hand, defy verbatim translation and provide an opportunity for intercultural encounters, on the other. This paper qualitatively interrogates the problem of cultural translatability and its relation to cultural in-betweenness in the cultural zone of contact between Arab Muslim immigrants and Westerners. Translation is not only a mere technical process the translator undergoes, it is also a cultural interaction between the cultures constituting the languages undergoing translation. Content and discourse analysis methods are particularly utilized to explore cultural untranslatability in Arab Migrant literature. In her polyphonous literary works *Minaret*, *The Translator* and *Lyrics Alley*, Leila Aboulela, through the Arab and Muslim culture-specific terms and expressions scattered throughout these narratives, navigates how far Islamic culture can be rendered to the Londoners (and to the Westerners in general). She also problematizes the feasibility of cultural translation in terms of terminology belonging to the religious field. In a sense, cultural untranslatability signifies, among many things, the uniqueness and peculiarity of cultures. However, she shows that cultural translation is, among other things, a form of dialogue between cultures being translated.

| KEYWORDS

Cultural translation, cultural in-betweenness, culture-specific, dialogism, polyphony.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In her literary works, Leila Aboulela depicts the incompatibility and incommensurability of cultures while she centers her attention on the possibility of mutual compromises and harmony with the Western Other. She debunks the untested misconceptions the West holds against Muslim immigrants and their faith. For Aboulela, culture is untranslatable in a way that specificity and cultural-boundedness do not deny the harmony of cultures; the reason why the characters in her novels are polyphonous. She utilizes cultural translation as an agency to defend the immigrant's Islamic logic. Little is known about the translatability vs. untranslatability of Muslim immigrants' culture, and how 'double-voicedness' and 'polyphony' might construct a cultural dialogue between Muslim and Western cultures. More importantly, the relationship between cultural untranslatability is underresearched. In this paper, the concern will not reside much in linguistic translation. Rather, the main aim is to tackle what migrant writers mostly do in that they are concerned with what the language carries of culture. Cultural translation encompasses several overwhelming questions such as whether culture is translatable, and what epistemic borderlines are to be drawn between linguistic and cultural translation. What is culture to translation? To what extent are these boundaries obviated in Aboulela's writings? How can translating one culture to another affects dialogue and understanding between these cultures?

This article first unravels the materials and methods that foregrounded this research and explains the rationale for why they were chosen among others. Second, it explores the theoretical background that framed this research. Major theories and ideas, such as translation, translatability, untranslatability, in-betweeness, dialogism, and polyphony, are discussed to respond to the problem of cultural translation in literature. Three novels by Leila Aboulela *Minaret* (2005), *The Translator* (1999), and *Lyrics Alley*

(2010) were chosen, among others, to show how she attempts to translate culture to the Western Other with an intention to strengthen her identity, call for Arab Muslim identity recognition on the part of the Westerners and invite them to unlearn their misconceptions about Arab Muslim immigrants', faith, culture and identity. Therefore, culture-bound terms and expressions were traced in these narratives, for one narrative would not suffice to evidence cultural untranslatability in Arab-Anglophone literature. More space and time would be needed, however, if more literary works needed to be included to study the issue of cultural untranslatability in more depth and variety. Third, the fourth section, therefore, deals with content and discourse analysis of chosen Arab Muslim culture-specific words and expressions to justify cultural untranslatability and its cultural benefits in terms of cultural difference and enrichment. Last but not least, the article concludes with a short summary of the main ideas it discusses and some contributions of this research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Cultural translation and translating culture

Being a postcolonial Muslim migrant writer might be considered a privilege as he/she is allotted an agency from which his/her identity can be voiced through the act of writing. Using English, indeed, is a powerful 'weapon' in the hands of the postcolonial writer. It paves the way for them to see the culture of the colonizer and attempt to resist it by deconstructing its hegemony using its tools. This language, moreover, offers a golden opportunity for the subaltern's voice to be widely heard given the international power and characteristics the English language epitomizes. Michel Foucault's couplet of power/knowledge is of paramount consideration in this regard. Mastering the colonizer's language means attaining the ability to 'write back' (Ashcroft et al., 2003, p. 33), to dismantle and unlearn the knowledge pre-shaped according to the colonizer's vision. This kind of mastery acts as an incentive for the postcolonial writer to produce reversed knowledge about the colonizer; knowledge that constitutes a threat to the ideological 'aura' which the colonizer utilizes to subdue the voiceless subaltern immigrants. This knowledge assists this writer in his/her resistance strategies to subsist and maintain the ability to reformulate and reverse the stereotyped apprehensions recurrent in the Western discourse.

Bhabha uses Walter Benjamin's perception of translation as a conceptual tool to analyze how translation operates. He presumes that culture is untranslatable due to the inevitable incommensurability of cultures and that this untranslatability functions as a form of resistance enacted by the postcolonial writer. Leila Aboulela, the famous Sudanese writer, in an interview with Peter Cherry (2008) says: "I never had a job in Sudan, so I have no experience in the Sudanese workplace. These are my limitations and so I am working within them and writing about what I know rather than what I don't know" (p. 8). Therefore, writing any culture entails knowing that culture as the subject of writing. Bhabha's presumption provides a new avenue which transcends the binary divisions of target and source texts. Bhabha (2012) purports that the trials of cultural translation pervade the colonial world. Cultural translation, he believes, brings together the earlier separate categories subsumed in colonizer-colonized dichotomies, suggesting that the contact zone among cultures results in new cultural forms which resist taking sides in either part, hence a culture floating in the liminal space. Bhabha's pivotal concern is how immigrants cope with Western culture and what the latter means to immigrants. It is within this cultural 'jostle' that identities are structured and re-structured, resulting in new cultural 'residues' non-liable to any form of translation. For Bhabha, Robert Young (2012), believes, "the dominant culture gets culturally translated by the migrant. Bhabha's theory of cultural translation is thus one in which the translation is, as it were, back to front, or to put it in more traditional translational terms, entirely foreignizing" (p.160). Thus, Bhabha postulates that cultural translation is a way to hybridize culture and subvert the hegemony of the immigrants' receiving culture.

Budick and Iser (eds., 1999) have a perception of cultural untranslatability closer to that of Bhabha. For them, translation is a key concept not merely for the encounter between cultures, but also for interactions within cultures. They look at the untranslatability of culture from the perspective that it does not function as a form of resistance on the part of migrants such as the case with Bhabha, but as the use of cultural difference to change the way descriptions are produced. In the translation contact between the source and the target languages, the cultures of both these respective languages interact on the basis of power relations through the porosity ingrained in this space where the two languages/cultures meet. Budick and Iser (eds., 1999) contend in this context that "[t]ranslation necessarily marks the border crossing where, if anywhere, one culture passes over to the other, whether to inform it, to further its development, to capture or enslave it, or merely to open a space between the other and itself" (p. 11). Migrants' identity, thus, is open to what cultural encounters through translation will bring out. Therefore, the space where translation occurs is a hybrid space replete with uncontrollable happenings that affect both the culture of immigrants and that of the Westerners. These alterations occurring during the language 'friction' between the two cultures are inevitable, yet changeable at the level of influence depending on power relations and the differences between the two cultures in the in-between zone of the translation contact.

The fact that Aboulela leaves her country to immigrate to England and Scotland brings sadness to her (Cherry, 2008), yet she finds a panacea in her strong want to succeed, hence the act of writing culture. This writing act reflects her cultural resistance, to refer to Bhabha's conception of cultural translation; to the cultural dominance her identity is subject to in a country not her own.

She finds recourse in using English, the linguistic tool of the colonizer, to defend Muslim immigrants' identity within the cultural realm of the West. The cultural differences between the Muslim culture, within which she is a member, and the British secular culture, ignite her willingness to write.

When Aboulela is asked in the interview about the feelings of British Islam converts (Cherry, 2008), she responds that these converts rather easily embrace Islam which, for them, functions as a source of attraction. Yet, what most interests her is that these converts help her immerse more in the host culture of the Other. "What is especially interesting," Aboulela states, "is they work as translators of the West for me. If I don't understand something about the West then I can ask them and they'll be sympathetic to my questions. They know where I'm coming from in a way so they can help me understand Britain Better" (Cherry, 2008, p. 5). While British citizens translate British culture and help her to understand it better, Aboulela translates her Sudanese culture – and through it Arab culture entirely – to British people and Westerners in general. Writing a culture, thus, is tightly related to the level of knowledge of the writer of that culture.

In this vein, Aboulela does not seek to 'write back,' or say, to jettison the Western cultural discourse altogether. She endeavors to carve a niche for herself to revive the Muslim identity in the pressing Western context. She therefore aims at establishing a new realm within what Bhabha (1994) terms 'third space' – a space which is neither prejudicial to her Sudanese culture nor subservient to the mainstream English culture. This is what Wail S. Hassan (2008) means when he argues that: "Aboulela is less concerned with reversing, rewriting, or answering back to colonial discourse than with attempting an epistemological break with it" (p. 299). This third-space position resembles thinking 'outside the box' of what both the culture of immigrants and that of the people of the receiving cultures are imbued with in terms of values, behaviours, ideologies, and so forth. It necessitates a 'hybrid,' 'in-between' culture which negates the one-sided valorisation of a particular culture over the other. The notion of hybridity, elaborated in Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), subverts the idea of pure original cultural identity. Bhabha's conception of hybridity is germane to his intricate essay *How Newness Enters the World* (2012). In this elaborate article, Bhabha examines the idea of cultural translation. He purports a new sense of translation which is rather broader than the limited conception of the interlinguistic translation. 'Cultural translation' moves beyond translations as restricted (written or spoken) texts; its concern is with overall cultural processes rather than with finite linguistic products. This is what Bhabha (2012) calls "translation without translations" (p. 144). He therefore assumes that translation is a site of cultural production where 'newness enters the world' as a corollary of the interaction and cultural 'friction' among people in the cultural borderline. He adds that this new conception of translation is enacted in the narrative space of migrant diasporic communities that inhabit the intervening space between the home and host cultures. Cultural translation, hence, holds a hybrid position in the sense that it takes from both cultures to feed a new understanding which establishes a new basis for mutual connection and communication between two cultures underlying the process of translation. However, Bhabha underscores the ambivalent position and resistance that pervades the interstitial space connecting the two cultures.

When a text is rendered from one language to another, what occurs between these two languages is not only linguistic intersection. Also, cultural friction between the cultures of both languages under translation has an adherent contact in the process. In this vein, Harish Trivedip (2007) puts it that "[t]he unit of translation was no longer a word or a sentence or a paragraph or a page or even a text, but indeed the whole language and culture in which that text was constituted" (p. 3). Language, thus, cannot be severed from the culture it is constructed in. More importantly, translation is a form of communication between the source and target languages.

2.2 Cultural translation and dialogism

Cultural translation includes, inter alia, a dialogue between the cultures being translated. Amith Kumar P.V. (2016) argues that "[a] text is the result of a dialogue with the culture from which it emerges" (p. 4). Cultural discourse, then, is moved from omnipresence and omnipotence to the plurality of voices. Kumar P.V. (2016) puts it in other words that "[c]ultures are not monolithic wholes, they are non-monologic entities that demonstrate an 'internal dialogism' in the Bakhtinian sense. The inner contradictions, disjunctions, differences, and assimilations of a particular culture lead to a dialogue with another culture's conflictual condition" (p. 20). Cultural translation for Mikhail Bakhtin is a form of mutual understanding between the source and target cultures. "The task of the translator," says Kumar P.V. (2016), "involves their entering a dialogic space, where the target text emerges from dialogue with both source culture and target culture. To translate is to create a new utterance with many 'microdialogues' (p. 9). Texts speak their respective cultures through their words. For Bakhtin, no text can be shaped without the concept of dialogism. Also, in illustration, any novel is governed by the notion of voicedness. That is, the novel presupposes a dialogue between a speaker (the author) and a receiver (the reader). In this respect, Aboulela speaks by writing English as well as Muslim cultures to the receiver/reader of her works, and this reader may be a Westerner, an Arab, or any reader interested in her works. Put differently, through the action of writing, Aboulela is bridging a canal of communication through which she voices out her in-between and floating identity.

According to Kumar P.V. (2016), Bakhtin claims that when two cultures meet, no culture is valorized over the other. Kumar P.V. (2016) posits that "[d]ialogic encounters help cultures to overcome their own 'closedness' and 'one-sidedness'" (p. 13). Unlike Ferdinand de Saussure who, according to Bakhtin, centers meaning in the process of signification (signifier/signified binary opposition), language is displaced from the object it refers to. For Bakhtin, without the word, the dialogical function will be absent because it lacks the process of interaction. The word itself is dialogical. Without the word, Aboulela's 'subalternity' would not speak. Language, thus, cannot be separated from one's culture and identity. In this regard, Susan Bassnett (2007) argues that

Separating language from culture is like the old debate about which came first – the chicken or the egg. Language is embedded in culture, linguistic acts take place in a context and texts are created in a continuum not in a vacuum. A writer is a product of a particular time and a particular context, just as a translator is a product of another time and another context. Translation is about language, but translation is also about culture, for the two are inseparable. (p. 23)

Aboulela has never written in Arabic. However, she transliterates Arabic terms and expressions she believes cannot be rendered into English due to their cultural exclusivity. Thus, culture can be translated but not entirely.

2.3 Polyphony, voicedness and cultural translation

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'polyphony' is key to understanding cultural translation. Fiction/culture itself is not monologic. It is based on plurality and multivocality. Culture, thus, can be fragmented into multiple voices. Another crucial concept of Bakhtin is double-voicedness. Any text is double-voiced. The notion embodies the voice of the author as a speaker who sees himself/herself in the reader as a receiver. That is, the interaction and 'tension,' to use Bakhtin's term, necessitates a double-voiced communication. In this regard, Kumar P.V. (2016) insists on "[d]ialogue as the basis for human interaction, and thereby the basis for human existence, is a cogent argument relevant in every cultural condition" (p. 18). Aboulela's novels under study are polyphonous in the sense that while she gives agency to the Muslim immigrant to speak, the latter's voice is not univocal. That is, Muslim immigrants do not represent a homogenous ethnicity and background in terms of their tendencies, ideologies and preferences. In *Minaret* (2005), for instance, Najwa, Omar (her twin brother), Anwar (a radical activist with whom she fell in love at university), Tamer (Lamya's younger brother), etc. affiliate with the same umbrella culture – the Muslim culture. However, huge differences – sometimes contradictions – exist among all these characters. Some of the differences are ideological (Anwar vs. Najwa), religious (Lamya as opposed to her brother Tamer who is religious), family upbringing (Omar vs. Najwa), and so forth. Aboulela's double-voicedness lies in the fact that she translates her culture through Sammar in *The Translator*, while she also gives voice to the cultural Other via the character of Rae, who used to be a secular scholar and becomes a Muslim at the end of the novel. Aboulela recognizes well that she cannot communicate her cultural message unless she allows the Other to speak. For her, one's identity cannot by any means be established separately from the different Other.

For Aboulela, giving space to the Other to define the Self entails that her writings are 'polyphonous' and 'double-voiced.' In the same way that Mikhail Bakhtin criticizes Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist conception of the 'word' as it cannot be understood synchronically and that meaning is no longer negotiated between the signifier and signified, but rather as multi-voiced and polyphonous, Edward Said (1978) himself thinks that culture exists because of the interconnectedness of many cultures that compete, contest and acclimatize themselves to the changing sequence of events. In this vein, it is the overwhelming culture of Aboulela which urges her to write and reflect upon the anxiety and hardships her characters encounter in England and Scotland. Edward Said (1978) writes that "all cultures are involved in one another: none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (p. xxix). It is the heterogeneity and multiculturalism of Britain mixed with the Arab culture that prompt Aboulela to recount the immigrants' experiences so she can manifest her own identity. Yet her representation of Muslim women through her female characters, mainly Sammar and Najwa in *The Translator* and *Minaret* respectively depict the rootedness of religion in the lives of many Muslim Women immigrants. Aboulela does not feel any grudge in reiterating her speech about devotion, supplication and Islam wholly. Indeed, as Hassan (2008) writes, her writings are "narratives of redemption and fulfillment through Islam" (p. 300). That is, her writings revolve around the same Islamic logic while they explore both Western and Muslim culture's intricacies.

3. Methodology

This research followed a qualitative approach based on content and discourse analysis methods. A qualitative approach seeks to reflect on people's experiences, ideas, and feelings. Therefore, aligning with this aim, this paper sought to investigate the possibility (or impossibility) of translating culture. This research textually analyzed three novels authored by the Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela *Minaret* (2005), *The Translator* (1999), and *Lyrics Alley* (2010) through postcolonial and structuralist approaches. On the one hand, crucial postcolonial concepts such as Homi Bhabha's 'hybridity' and 'resistance.' On the other hand, pertinent linguistic concepts such as 'translation,' Mikhail Bakhtin's 'dialogism' and 'polyphony' framed this research. 'Using content analysis tool, this research aimed at studying cultural-bound terms which defy translation. Therefore, throughout these three novels under scrutiny in this article, many cultural and religious words, expressions, and sentences were quoted to justify cultural

untranslatability. Also, the relationship between these culture-specific terms and expressions and Arab Muslim immigrants' cultural identity and religion was explored through the discourse analysis method. As a result, linguistic expressions and structures were analyzed to develop a deeper understanding of the translation process, migrants' culture, besides the dialogic intersection between the Arabic language and English in these novels. The aim of selecting these three novels was to expand the scope of data and provide extensive evidence of cultural translatability (or untranslatability) in Arab Muslim migrant literature. Significantly enough, this research blends the structuralist and postcolonial approaches to exemplify the pertinent relationship between language and culture.

4. Results

4.1 Cultural translatability vs. untranslatability

Before shedding light on the relation between cultural translation and linguistic translation and their germaneness to my study of three of Aboulela's works (*The Translator*, 1999; *Minaret*, 2005; *Lyrics Alley*, 2010), the two crucial concepts of translatability and untranslatability need special consideration. The idea of cultural translation is doubly ambiguous. Kyle Conway (2012) complexifies the concept when she suggests that: "[f]irst, it is not clear what is being translated. Is it culture itself, or something else? And what exactly does 'culture' refer to? Second, it is not clear what operation 'translation' describes. Indeed, what happens when concepts of translation are expanded beyond linguistic re-expression?" (p. 2). The complexity thus lies in the fact that cultural translation is unrelated to linguistic issues *per se*. Rather, it deals with cultural aspects, which mainly depend on the extent to which both cultures are distinct in translation. However, Robert Young (2012) argues that "[n]o one translates a culture in the same way as they do a text" (p. 156). This takes the discussion to the realm of structuralism.

Unlike Ferdinand de Saussure, Mikhail Bakhtin sees the word not as a sign in the same sense conceived by de Saussure. The problem with translation exists in the realm of signifier/signified, two concepts widely associated with de Saussure. What a signifier means in one region even within the same culture may mean another utterly distinct thing in another context or place. This sometimes feeds misunderstanding among people belonging to various cultures. R. H. Gilmour (2012) is right when he claims that "to negotiate between languages, from a bi- or multi-lingual position, is also necessarily to engage, whether explicitly or obliquely, with the politics of language, the limits of translatability, and the question of the relationship between language and identity" (p. 3). Translatability, hence, entails the presence and interaction between both language and cultural identity.

The question of language and identity extends the translation task to an arena beyond mere linguistic rendering and the politics of the language sign. Bakhtin stretches the process of language signification to include the issue that any translation of one culture to another through the medium of language establishes a process of dialogue between these two cultures. In Aboulela's interview with Claire Chambers (2009), she establishes a cultural and religious dialogue between the abode of Islam and that of Christianity: "[Sammar] is not [only] translating Arabic into English, she is also translating Islam for Rae" (p. 95). By translating Islam to him, she is transferring Muslim culture to him as well. Seemingly, Aboulela prompts the Western Other to closely study the Islamic faith to understand Islam and Muslims better.

Talal Asad purports, on the other hand, that in the field of cultural translation throughout modern history, translation has been subjected to power relations in the sense that much focus and consideration has been placed on translating 'social sciences,' 'history,' 'philosophy,' and 'literature' originating from the West, whereas most of the knowledge originating from the East has been underestimated and considered unworthy of study or reference. Asad believes that,

> Because the languages of Third World societies — including, of course, the societies that social anthropologists have traditionally studied — are 'weaker' in relation to Western languages (and today, especially to English), they are more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around. (Clifford and Marcus eds., 1986, pp. 157-158)

Therefore, what Aboulela includes in her writings about the English, the Scottish, the Sudanese and the Egyptian people implies a great level of realism at least from her perspective due to the knowledge she has accumulated from wide contacts with different cultures given her peripatetic life and work. Yet, sometimes, as Said (1978) argues, the immigrant falls into being a mobilizer of such hegemony first by giving an aura of ubiquity to the English language (though Aboulela is Arab, she never writes in Arabic), and second by making her characters fall prey to the alluring civilization of the West. Najwa, for instance, is deeply hypnotized by peace, stability, democracy and cultural diversity in the West; "[a] place where [she] could make future plans and it wouldn't matter who the government was – they wouldn't mess up [her] day-to-day life" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 116). Aboulela immigrates to the West in order to mediate and represent the Muslim identity in an English cultural context and examine the hardships a diasporant can encounter when they move to another cultural environment different from their own and are prompted to practice their identity in an unfitting cultural context. Instead, she is connected to her identity more than the cultural Other. She,

therefore, translates the culture of the Other merely for the sake of 'writing back' the misconceptions held against Muslim culture.

4.2 Culture-boundedness and Cultural Untranslatability

Crucial to this paper's aim is cultural translatability with respect to Aboulela's aim to defend Muslim culture and religion within Western culture. Sammar usually switches to using more culturally-bound terms the moment she 'imagines' her home country, aiming to impart her woes and ideas to the people of her country, as if only these people would understand her better. In this respect, Young (2012) argues that "the act of translation […] violates the specificity of the source language, and it is for this reason that Benjamin speaks of the 'brutality' of translation" (p. 165). Aboulela challenges Benjamin's idea of 'the brutality of language' by stuffing her narratives with Arab and Muslim culture-bound words and expressions. The words such as "*muezzin,*" *"azan,"* and *"Isha"* (Aboulela, 1999, p. 21) are not merely Muslim culture and religion-bound, but also not liable to translation as they would lose their religious connotation and psychological impact. Indeed, these culture and religion-specific words remind her of the call to prayer in her homeland, Sudan. Aboulela's use of these terms in an English text, therefore, is not only self-empowering with regard to her identity but also universalizes her culture. In this vein, Robert Young (2012) puts it that

> The fundamental difference between a cultural translation and a literal translation centers on the fact that in cultural translation the whole "text" of a culture is not translated: the necessity for cultural translation only begins with the presence of elements in the source culture for which there is no exact equivalent elsewhere–the particular which is not translatable, that is, universal, is the element which is untranslatable. (pp. 170-171)

One more vivid example of untranslatability of culture is related to Rae's understanding of some spiritual concepts. Rae is slow in fathoming out the meaning of 'Divinity,' hence his inability to reply quickly when Sammar explains it, because of the spiritual load the word embodies. A sacred *hadith* such as "*I am as My servant thinks I am […] And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed*" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 42, italics in original), would be illogical and unfathomable to Rae (Sammar's lover) given the secularist nature of the English culture which is based on interpreting things materialistically. Sammar, too, admits that meanings when rendered from Arabic into English, especially religious statements, stay vexing and rather less conveying of meaning than in the original form. Rae asks her if another more fathomable translation of the concept 'Divinity' is available and she responds by claiming that there is rather a myriad of translations for the concept; all of them seek the intelligibility of the source meaning. Sammar explains to him that "'[f]or the first sentence, there is a footnote which says, another possible rendering of the Arabic is, *I am as My servant expects Me to be*. And I feel this is closer to the Arabic word which means *expects*, *thinks*, even *speculates*'" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 42*,* italics mine). Linguistic translation, as a result, might not be accurate, but rather 'closer' to accuracy because of exclusive cultural and religious peculiarities.

Likewise, In *Lyrics Alley* (2010), Aboulela, through her recurrent use of religious expressions such as '*Alhamdulillah*,' '*Insha'allah*,' is not merely proving their untranslatability, she is also communicating Muslims' way of worship and supplication. In the *Ramadan* scene, *Ustaz* Badr (an ex-tutor of Nur, Abuzeid's son) is preparing to receive the month with a high level of spirituality. Even his family's love has become better because of this spiritual load he has accumulated in the sacred month. The narrator says:

> Little Ali would sit on his lap, listening and lulled as Badr recited the Qur'an, going over the suras he had memorised. He taught Osama surat Yasin, Bilal completed Juzu' Aama and Radwan learnt Surat Al-Borooj. This was joy; his sons loving him and wanting to please him, strong in body and in faith. (Aboulela, 2010, p. 80).

Aboulela could have used the common English word 'teacher' instead of 'Ustad.' However, the latter's functional role in terms of its psychological impact on the Sudanese people's minds and culture is revealing. Being an 'Ustad' is widely known in Arab culture to symbolize erudition, esteem and dignity. In Arab culture, even if you do not teach, people would call you 'ustad' as long as they appreciate you. The words 'Qur'an,' '*Juzu'* Aama,' 'Surat Al-Borooj' and 'surat Yasin' are not merely Arab culture-specific, but also Islam-specific. According to Talal Asad (Clifford and Marcus eds., 1986), languages are unequal. Hence, such culture-specific terms are impossible to render given their particular germanness to the Muslim culture and religion. For Aboulela, thus, words may lose their meanings when transferred from Arabic into English, yet faith is translatable; and via this translatability of faith, bridges of cultural understanding and mutuality are constructed. In this respect, Aboulela stresses that the Sudanese people are capable of acclimatizing their suffering and pain and rather find recourse in their faith. The latter for them functions as a saviour and a healer.

Linguistic translation in *Lyrics Alley*, however, seems not as prominent as the case in both *Minaret* and *The Translator*. The settings of the narratives are of paramount importance in this regard. While *Minaret* and *The Translator* are set in London and Scotland, Aboulela keeps itinerating in both space and time in *Lyrics Alley*. In the latter, England is referred to just when the wealthy Abouzeid's family goes to London for tourism and when Nur is hospitalized by English neurologists in London.

Therefore, the focus on intercultural encounters between Muslim culture and the Christian one is minimized in *Lyrics Alley* compared to the other narratives; thereby gearing more cultural attention to the local Sudanese and Egyptian cultures and assimilation of Western values in the latter.

Aboulela is much interested, as evidenced in her three narratives, in depicting the everyday practices, integration phases, frictions, tensions, attitudes, behaviours of Muslim migrants in English society. She rather observes her people and their representation of both Muslim and Sudanese identity in the British context. She immerses herself in this process, too. She aims to explore the emotional and spiritual lives of her Sudanese protagonists. For Aboulela, translation is a question of loyalty, fidelity, and of how to transfer 'value' without any diminution in meaning. Yet she believes that a feeling of incompleteness of meaning during the translation process is unavoidable. In illustration, the untransferability of terms which are mainly culturally Muslim-specific for fear that they would likely lose their accurate meanings, is a leitmotif in Aboulela's works, specifically in *The Translator*. The expressions 'tasbeeh,' 'Astaghfir Allah' are Islam–bound terms. Perhaps culture and religion-specific terms constitute an invitation on the part of Aboulela to the Westerners to 'know' Muslim culture and recognize it in its alterity. Their rendering as "her thumb counting on each segment of her fingers ...," and "I seek forgiveness from Allah" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 37) serves merely to help the Western Other come closer to and be acquainted with the spiritually intended meaning. However, such spirituality and feeling remain incomplete and unbridged in comparison to the connotations they carry in their original form. That is, they are, as it were, spiritually 'cold' and 'inactive.' Sammar even uses the concept of Allah instead of God. Hence, Arab Muslim immigrants do not translate their invocation for fear that their spirituality would not serve its purpose.

5. Conclusion

This research interrogates Aboulela's attempts to respond to questions of translation and translatability/untranslatability that are fundamental to the unfolding of her three narratives: how far Islam is translatable to the Londoners, and into this English-medium text; how far London and the English language, can accommodate Islam (Glimour 2012). The findings indicate that translation offers a dialogic and polyphonic opportunity to the Self and Other in the writing process. Indeed, it is the translation that is prevalent in the novels (especially *Minaret* and *Lyrics Alley*) rather than untranslatability, as Aboulela aspires through her act of writing to re-position Islam and Muslim culture in the center. In Bhabha's conception, she utilizes translation as a form of resistance against the West's cultural control. Her transliteration of Arabic terms and expressions into English clarifies that her culture cannot wholly be subsumed into the realm of the language of the Other. For her, untranslatability represents a cultural and religious resistance option to Western secular and hegemonic culture. This research is poised to make significant contributions to intercultural communication between Arab Muslim culture and that of the West through translation and literature. It is also an invitation to the West to recognize Muslim immigrants' cultural and religious identity in their alterity.

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