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# Identity Construction and Language in Literature: Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

Rawiya KOUACHI[1]

Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Setif 2 University, Algeria

r.kouachi@univ-setif2.dz

0000-0002-2687-051X

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**Abstract**

This research seeks to shed light on the construction of identities in relation to the choice of language in literature in Leila Aboulela's novel *The Translator*. It aims to cast light on the importance of language in constructing characters' identities that oscillate between two distinct cultures. Hence, from a postcolonial perspective mainly the ideas of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, the research shows that the author succeeds in transmitting Arab and Muslim culture in an English text through appropriation strategies by inserting code switching, glossing, syntactic fusion, translated and untranslated Arabic words and expressions, Quranic citations and Islamic references. Albeit the novel is written in English, it bears the characters' Arab and Muslim identities. Aboulela's *The Translator* exemplifies how appropriation functions as a means of reasserting "Other" identities within the dominant discourse of the former colonial language. In this regard, the choice of language is a marker of identity construction and cultural belonging inasmuch as it conveys the characters' cultural values and religious orientations. In addition, through the protagonist Sammar, who is a translator, Aboulela translates cultural and religious practices of Arab and Muslim people in diaspora. Sammar, as her name denotes conversation, consolidates both Eastern and Western cultures. This union is reinforced with her marriage to Rae, a Scottish academic who converted to Islam. Thus, Aboulela's *The Translator* portrays vividly Arab Muslim people's situation in both Scotland and Sudan and endeavors to rectify misconceptions about Arabs and Muslims who have been portrayed as the "Other" in Western discourse. Consequently, the novel celebrates cross cultural communication, cultural diversity and mutual understanding in transcultural society.

**Keywords;** Aboulela's *The Translator;* appropriation strategies; identity construction; immigrants; language.

[1] Corresponding author: Rawiya KOUACHI/ r.kouachi@univ-setif2.dz

## Introduction

Identity construction is a crucial topic in Arab women's literature, especially in relation to immigrants who struggle to live between two cultures. It is a complex process where immigrants endeavor to reconcile between their indigenous heritage and new and foreign culture in diaspora. Accordingly, immigrants go through a myriad of psychological issues due to displacement and lack of belonging to nowhere. Many writers cast light on immigrants' problems in diaspora and among the authors who have tackled this topic is the Sudanese-Scottish writer Leila Aboulela. She has published a myriad of literary works that shed light on women's identity construction in diaspora. One of her notable novels is *The Translator*. Albeit the novel is written in English and it is about the life of a translator Sammar who is supposed to translate every single word from Arabic to English, it includes words and expressions in Arabic. Accordingly, this research endeavors to cast light on Aboulela's choice of language in relation to the construction of her characters' identity. From a postcolonial standpoint, it attempts to unravel the strategic function of using Arabic in an English text and its importance in asserting "anOther" identity through the use of appropriation strategies in postcolonial discourse.

## *1.* Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

*The Translator* was published in 1999. It is about the intricacies of life of a Sudanese widow Sammar who lives in Aberdeen, Scotland. It depicts her romantic relationship with a Scottish lecturer in Middle-Eastern politics, Rae Isles. The protagonist Sammar is known as a Muslim Jane Eyre and the novel is named "the first halal novel written in English". *The Translator* depicts Sammar's cultural dilemma of attempting to preserve her Sudanese and Islamic identity in a foreign country through living between Scotland and her home country Sudan. The novel casts light on immigrants' hybrid identities and their struggles to mediate between their indigenous identity and the Western culture. They oscillate between assimilation and resistance to live in-between two different cultures. In this novel, Leila Aboulela depicts vividly Sudanese immigrants' cultural and religious practices through the narrator Sammar who is a translator. In this regard, both Sammar and the author Aboulela act as translators. In other words, Sammar is a translator and Aboulela stands for a translator of "anOther" Eastern culture to Western readers through introducing cultural practices and values. Yet, her novel includes untranslated words and expressions from Arabic and code switching from English to Arabic.

In general, code switching is viewed as a language deficiency because a person is unable to find the appropriate term in the target language. It demonstrates a person's lack of vocabulary to express his/her ideas. It is an important aspect of appropriation strategies in postcolonial discourse. Accordingly, what is the function of this writing strategy in a novel whose narrator Sammar is a translator who is supposed to be able to translate from Arabic into English without any deficiency? What is the importance of implementing untranslated language through appropriation strategies in a novel written in English and directed mainly to Western readership?

## 2. Appropriation Strategies

In contemporary era, translingualism is a common practice for many writers. It is used in many texts, especially in postcolonial texts. It is:

> The phenomenon of authors who write in more than one language or at least in a language other than their primary one…their position between languages enabled them to challenge the limits of their own literary medium. (Kellman, 2000, p. ix).

In this regard, various postcolonial authors use translingualism. However, the use of another foreign language is a double-edged sword. For some authors, like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, using a foreign language, especially a colonizer language in writing literary works, is regarded as another form of colonization of the mind and a betrayal of the native language. Nevertheless, other writers, as Chinua Achebe, consider a colonizer language as a war booty to be used to gain international readership. In addition, using another foreign language in writing literary works is considered as a way of emancipation to express one's ideas and thoughts. Steven Kellman says: "multilingualism is emancipation…the trans-lingual author can exercise the freedom of gratuitous expression" (Kellman, 2000, p. 36). However, in many postcolonial texts, writers use the colonizer language, but they implement their native language in their foreign text. This is known as appropriation.

In postcolonial discourse, appropriation strategies are regarded as a tool of counter orientalism. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, appropriation "is the process by which the language is taken and made to bear the burden of one's own cultural experience" (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 38). This means that each language represents its culture. In addition, Raja Rao states that it is necessary to transmit through a foreign language a person's cultural values and spirit to other Western readers (Rao, 1938, p. xiii). In other words, it is necessary for writers, especially postcolonial authors, to use the colonizer language to convey their interests and concerns because of the popularity of Western languages as English and French. Actually, there are many strategies of appropriation.

First, code switching refers to the use and insertion of foreign words in a text or speech. It is the "use of overt material (from single morphemes to entire sentences) from language B in language A discourse" (Backus & Dorlejin, 2012, pp. 76-77). It also "describes the speech of bilinguals/multilinguals or bidialectals who juxtapose elements from two or more language varieties in a single utterance or piece of discourse" (Albirini, 2016, p. 216). In this regard, code switching is used by postcolonial authors to depict people's concerns in multicultural societies. It is one of the most essential landmarks of postcolonial discourse to assert colonized people language. Code switching plays an important role in postcolonial literary works. According to Dina Hassan, code switching is used by postcolonial authors for two main reasons. First, it is for demonstrating the conflicts of bilingual people in monolingual societies. Hence, authors use code switching to assert bilingualism and endeavor to show the positive aspects of using code switching which is not regarded as a language deficiency. Second, the implementation of code switching adds authenticity to the postcolonial text inasmuch as the original conversations between the characters were not in the target language English. They were in their mother tongue. Thus, it is difficult to translate every single word and the use of code switching shows the originality of the postcolonial text (Hassan D. , 2018, p. 519). Therefore, code switching is highly beneficial in postcolonial discourse to insert an author's identity and language in a text written in the colonizer language. In this regard, a postcolonial author colonizes a colonizer text through the use of code switching.

Second, glossing or glossary means explanation of non-foreign words. That is to say, the author provides explanation of foreign words in his/her literary work. This explanation can be inside the text through a parenthetic translation as it can be at the end of the text in the form of glossary. In addition, glossing is a gap between non-foreign and foreign words to "represent the difference through which an identity (created or recovered) can be expressed" (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 61). Therefore, glossing represents a difference between two languages and cultures. Most importantly, it deepens Western readers' understanding of another Eastern culture. It enriches their background knowledge about "Other" cultural values, practices and languages.

The third appropriation strategy is untranslated words. In this case, the author does not provide any explanation or translation to the words of his/her native language. The use of this strategy is regarded as "selective lexical fidelity" (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 63) because the writer intends to insert his own identity in a text written in a foreign language. The aim is to accentuate

cultural distinctiveness and to push the reader to search and learn about other unknown languages and cultures. Untranslated words represent a cultural sign of distinctiveness (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 64). Thus, the integration of untranslated words helps in inserting the author's cultural identity and background.

The last outstanding appropriation strategy is syntactic fusion. It means combining linguistic structures of both colonial and local languages. They are meshed together in a literary text. Syntactic fusion can take different forms, like a metonymic use of adjectives, the use of double comparatives and the excessive use of plurals (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 68). In this way, a literary text is not written in one single language, but there is a linguistic plurality to represent the spirit of globalization and interconnectedness.

These are the most used appropriation strategies in a postcolonial text. They are used to assert "anOther" language to dominate the English text. In other words, they are employed by postcolonial authors to colonize the colonizer language. Hence, instead of writing an "English" text, postcolonial authors write a special "english" text to represent their cultural values and backgrounds. In this regard, writers publish outstanding and distinct literary works through dismantling standard "English". This is a form of postcolonial counter discourse. According to Pramod K. Nayar (2010),

> In each case, the postcolonial writer asserts her identity, not in an abandonment of the former European master's Language, but its appropriation. A postcolonial identity is forged, in many cases, not in return to a pre-colonial language or a 'pure' form, but in hybridization where political independence means that the postcolonial is empowered through the colonial past to fashion a new identity. While it is possible to argue that this makes postcolonialism a derivative discourse and form; it is also clear that a Hybridization is an act of agency and freedom where the writer creatively uses English… to show how the crucial weapon of colonization can become a weapon of the postcolonial as well. (Nayar, 2010, p. 85)

Appropriated English is a distinctive feature of postcolonial language in many postcolonial authors' literary works and Leila Aboulela's selected novel is no exception.

## 3. Language in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* is written in English, and Sammar, at the beginning of the novel, is introduced as a translator to translate Al-Nidaa's manifesto from Arabic into English. However, the novel includes various translated and untranslated Arabic words and expressions. In this regard, Wail Hassan asserts that Arab diaspora writers are generally placed between two spaces of the Orient and Occident. That is to say, because of their backgrounds and origins, they do not stand outside the Orient like other Western authors. Furthermore, they are part of the Occident because of immigration and acculturation. In this case, they are more privileged than other authors in representing two different cultures and addressing different readers in their hometown and their host country. They provide a special perspective about both cultures in their literary works (Hassan W., 2011, pp. 28-29). In this regard, Aboulela is placed in-between two cultures. The protagonist Sammar, as a translator, stands between two languages to transmit cultural practices. She provides an outstanding outlook and distinct language.

Yet, it is difficult to depict Arab and Muslim people's practices in another language. The translator, in some cases, is unable to express his/her ideas in another foreign language and it is difficult to find the exact translation of some specific words. In this regard, Zoya Proshina states:

> No word in one language is completely equivalent to a word in another language and that each language expresses a concept in a slightly different manner with such and such a denotation, and each language places it on a rung that is higher or lower on the ladder of feeling. (Proshina, 2008, p. 27).

This is well demonstrated in Aboulele's novel. Rae asks Sammar about a translation of a Sacred Hadith and she suggests another translation to this translated Hadith: "I am as My servant thinks I am," by saying: "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). Furthermore, Rae says to Sammar that it is difficult to be just in translations inasmuch as the original meaning cannot be preserved and much is lost. Then, she replies: "Yes, the meanings can be translated but not reproduced" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 124). This idea is shown in the whole novel and the author highlights this difficulty of translation in many parts of *The Translator*. The narrator states that Sammar, as a translator, worked very hard to "push Arabic into English, English into Arabic" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 156). In this regard, translation is difficult. For this reason and other postcolonial writing strategies, *The Translator* includes many appropriation strategies. The novelist uses various Arabic words and expressions and religious sources.

Code switching, as an outstanding appropriation strategy, is apparent in many parts of the novel. The latter includes many shifts from English into Arabic. The narrator says: "A bicycle bell tinkle, frogs croaked, the *muezzin* coughed into the microphone and began the *azan* for the *Isha* prayer" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 21). Then, it is stated that Sammar is unable to sleep and "the absence of pain would not come" She says: "*Ya Allah, Ya Arham El-Rahimeen*" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 22). The last words can be translated to English saying Oh God, you are the most Merciful, the most Compassionate, but the author prefers to convey certain deep emotions by using Arabic because it is more expressive about her painful situation. Moreover, while sitting under the light of moon and stars in her hometown Sudan, Sammar clearly sees her brother and "the *jallabia* he was wearing" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 146). In this case, it is difficult to find the correct English word to describe her brother's cloth. Thus, it is necessary to make code switching. In another example, Sammar says "The *Ingeleez*" after saying the British to show clearly her native language. In addition, in another conversation with Rae, she says: "*Scotlandi*….You should say *Ana Scotlandi mish Irelandi*" then Rae asks: "What does *shirk al asbab* mean?" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 86). In the aforementioned quotes, code switching is demonstrated through the use of Italics to show another different language from the original language of the text. This is to draw the attention of the reader that these italicized words are part of "anOther" language.

In the novel, code switching is shown in different aspects. The most apparent one is linguistic code switching as it is demonstrated in the previous conversations between different characters that switch between English and Arabic. In addition, cultural code switching is visible in the characters' behavior. Since they live in-between two cultures, they attempt to adjust their behaviors according to their situation whether in Scotland or Sudan. Throughout the novel, Sammar, for instance, endeavors to accommodate with the Scottish society, but at the same time she tries to preserve her religious and cultural practices. Her behaviors oscillate between assimilation and resistance to Western values that result in her hybrid identity in transcultural society. Thus, code switching adds authenticity to the appropriated "english" text as an example of postcolonial counter discourse.

Another appropriation strategy used by Aboulela is glossing. In many quotes, she uses glossing or translated words to explain the meaning in English. Sammar illustrates the meaning of her ex-husband name Tarig by saying: "It's written with a *qaf* but we pronounce the *qaf* as a g back home" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 6). This is to explain her Sudanese pronunciation to Westerners. The narrator also describes her religious practice of praying by saying:

> She sat for the *tasbeeh*, her thumb counting on each segment of her fingers, three for each finger, fifteen for a hand, *Astaghfir Allah, Astaghfir Allah, Astaghfir Allah*, …I seek forgiveness from Allah…I seek forgiveness from Allah…I seek forgiveness from Allah. (Aboulela, 1999, p. 37).

In this quote, Aboulela wants to convey a religious message to Western readers through using Arabic and its English translation three times. Furthermore, in trying to respond to Rae's question, she explains: "*Asbab* are causes, intermediaries, so *shirk al-asbab* means the polytheism of intermediaries" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 86). In another quote, she tries to convert Rae to Islam. She says: "Just say the *shahadah*, it's just a few words: *I bear witness there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah*. End of story" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 92). Here in this quote, the words of *shahadah* are translated into English and italicized to highlight the importance of the message to readers in general and Western readers in particular. Furthermore, it is mentioned in the novel: "She found the *habbahan*. It existed, it had a name: whole green cardamom" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 97). The translation of these words enables a foreign reader to get a clear idea about another different language and culture. Most importantly, the use of this appropriation strategy is crucial to transmit Aboulela's native language and culture to foreign readers.

In the novel, glossing is related to religious terms and cultural practices. The ultimate aim is to help readers to be familiar with some Islamic practices and Eastern culture. In this regard, the use of glossing enriches readers', particularly Western readers' knowledge about "Other" religions and cultures.

Compared to glossing, untranslated words are highly used in *The Translator*. They are used deliberately by the author to represent her own origins and authenticity of her text. In a conversation, Sammar says to her pregnant friend Yasmin the following: "You know that *mash'Allah* you look bigger than five months" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 91) and she also says: "*Al hamdulillah*, she's up today" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 138). Albeit it is easy to translate these words, Aboulela does not provide any translation or explanation to push the reader to search about their meaning or to guess from the context to be an active reader. Moreover, talking about Arab women, she says: "Their eyes rimmed with *kohl*" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 164). Then, the keeper "was young and gangly with broken teeth and a smell of *hashish*" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 185). For a foreign reader, the words *kohl* and *hashish* are unfamiliar and s/he tries to guess the meaning from the context. Hence, using untranslated words is an important strategy to engage the reader with the postcolonial text and its cultural and religious backgrounds.

In addition, there is no explanation to the Arabic words in Italics. The narrator states:

> It now came as a relief, the reminder that there was something bigger than all this, above everything. *Allah akbar, Allah akbar*….She went to make *wudu* and had to tidy the bathroom first because the children had splashed the walls with water. (Aboulela, 1999, p. 143).

Other examples of untranslated words are as follows: "The children sat on the stools around the table. The clutter of plastic dishes, murmurs from her, Say *bismillah* before you eat" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 168). In trying to convert Rae, Sammar says: "You should be nice and say *salamu alleikum*" and Rae replies "*Alleikum al-salaam*" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 197). Accordingly, an important remark about the aforementioned words and expressions is that they refer to Islam. Thus, the use of untranslated words is an essential strategy to convey Eastern people's culture and religion to Western audience. They demonstrate characters' attachment to their origins in Western society.

In this regard, the implementation of untranslated words adds authenticity to the postcolonial text. It also engages the Western reader in particular to discover new words and

expressions. Furthermore, it demonstrates the characters' cultural and religious origins. Most importantly, it is regarded as a form of colonization to the colonizer text. In other words, the use of Arabic in an English text diminishes the dominance of English to be "english". In this case, postcolonial authors write back to the center by invading colonial language through inserting their language that bears their culture, religion and origins.

The last appropriation strategy is syntactic fusion which refers to blending different linguistic structures in one single text. Characters in the novel tend to mix English with Arabic words to represent their hybrid identity and bilingualism in Western society. Moreover, double comparatives, as an outstanding aspect of syntactic fusion, is not used in its grammatical structure. Rather, it is highly used in terms of comparing between Sudanese and Scottish culture. In the novel, Sammar compares between her community-based Sudanese society and Scottish society which is based on individualism. Sammar describes Christmas night saying: "empty streets, as if people were indoors asleep….Private people…made private by the cold. Celebrating indoors and the streets, instead of looking festive, look bleak without people" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 31). In addition, she states her early cultural shocks in Scotland. She says:

> Years ago, these same streets were a maze of culture shocks. Things that jarred-an earring on a man's earlobe, a woman walking a dog big enough to swallow the infant she was at the same time pushing in a pram, the huge billboards on the roads: Wonderbra, cigarette ads that told people to smoke and not smoke at the same time. (Aboulela, 1999, p. 70).

Such comparisons cast light on the main differences between the two cultures and accentuate characters' inner conflict and trauma to live in-between Eastern and Western world. Thus, syntactic fusion is a significant hallmark in postcolonial authentic texts.

In general, appropriation strategies are important to postcolonial authors to assert their own identity. In this regard, instead of writing in their native language or the colonizer language, postcolonial Arab women writers select a language in-between by using both the colonizer and the colonized people's language in the same literary text. In other words, they colonize the colonizer language by using appropriation strategies to endorse "anOther" language of subaltern people. Magdelene Brown and Patchainayagi S. (2022) view that:

> Appropriations in the literary texts by the marginalized had been a creative tool in enhancing the native nub of any author who wanted to glaze his culture and identity with the reality that the natives experience. Bilingualism is innate in any postcolonial writer; to use that inherent particulate quality in establishing an identity or accepting the given identity by the west is what makes a difference. (Brown & Patchainayagi, 2022, p. 614).

Most importantly, the aim of postcolonial authors is to disseminate Eastern culture and language to Western audience. The use of native language in an English text contributes to the process of decolonization by creating their unique style of writing and contributing to transculturalism. Dina Hassan ascertains:

> Multilingualism is an advantage that allows the author to look for the right word among the repertoires available across languages- a capacity that when used skillfully enriches the text and adds another level of multiculturalism much needed in today's globalized world. (Hassan D. , 2018, p. 516).

Thus, the use of appropriation strategies is helpful for any writer as well as Western audience to widen their scope of culture.

In fact, Aboulela's use of appropriation strategies accentuates her Eastern identity in a Western text. She endeavors to unite both Eastern and Western cultures not only through her appropriated language, but by advocating communication and reconciliation between her characters from different cultural backgrounds. Through her protagonist Sammar, whose name denotes conversation, Aboulela attempts to transmit her native language, culture and religion to her Western audience by inserting her Sudanese dialect and Islamic practices. In many cases, Sammar is described practising her Islamic religion or explaining the tenets of Islam to Rae. In this regard, Aboulela endeavors to correct misconceptions about Islam and reconcile Eastern and Western polarities in her text. Such reconciliation is reinforced with the marriage of Sammar and Rae at the end of the novel. Hence,

> The relationship between Sammar and Rae provides a model for cross-cultural exchange, conversation, love and translation which resists the stagnant binaries of East and West, the residual ideologies of colonialism" (Smyth, 2007, p. 180).

Therefore, Aboulela, through *The Translator*, attempts to translate Eastern culture and religion to Westerners to advocate transculturalism. Even the names of her major characters reinforce communication inasmuch as Sammar means conversation and Rae refers to opinion in Arabic. Consequently, the union of both characters through marriage advocates cross cultural communication between Eastern and Western culture.

## Conclusion

The analysis reveals that although Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* was written in English, it contains a myriad of Arabic words and expressions and Islamic references and citations as a reflection of appropriation strategies to demonstrate the protagonist's indigenous identity in an English text. While the narrative ostensibly follows the personal and professional journey of Sammar, a Sudanese translator living in Scotland, it simultaneously demonstrates Aboulela's conscious attempt to assert Arab-Muslim identity within a Western literary tradition. That is to say, to insert one's identity and culture, it is necessary to include cultural references, practices and events in a literary text. Most importantly, it is the embodiment of indigenous concepts and language through appropriation strategies that accentuate a person's identity and existence in the era of translingualism and transculturalism. Hence, the analysis of Aboulela's *The Translator* unravels the use of many appropriation strategies; such as, code switching, glossing, untranslated words and syntactic fusion. These strategies dismantle the Western languages hegemony in literature and spur postcolonial authors' linguistic freedom to insert their major concerns and reclaim their narrative authority. Thus, appropriation strategies in Aboulela's *The Translator* are regarded as methods of textual decolonization. They enable both resistance to cultural assimilation and the possibility of intercultural understanding in diaspora. In this regard, appropriation strategies give a voice to various hybrid linguistic identities of diasporic subjects and promote a literary space that accommodates diversity, multiplicity and difference. Consequently, the use of appropriation strategies in Aboulela's novel advocates cross cultural communication in transcultural societies. Yet, these results represent only one perspective of analyzing Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* which is open to further future research about the importance of using language in constructing identities in diaspora.

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