

Us and Others: Gender Otherness in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* Hassiba MAZOUZI

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Received: 09/06/2019

Revised: 13/06/2021

Accepted: 04/07/2021

Abstract

The perception of the Arab Muslim woman as the Other in Leila Aboulela's novel, The Translator, is presented through the portrayal of the Arab Muslim female protagonist as the Other within two different contexts (Scotland and Sudan); and how this vision affects her self-perception as being the Other. Her gender positioning is manifested in various scenes throughout the narrative and paves the way to these main queries: How is the female protagonist portrayed as the Arab Muslim female Other in both contexts? How does she perceive herself as the Muslim female Other?

Keywords: *Other, feminist theory, gender beliefs, male domination, patriarchy.*

تصورات جنسانية: المرأة العربية المسلمة كآخر في رواية ليلى أبو العلا "المتترجمة"

ملخص

إن تصور المرأة العربية المسلمة كآخر في رواية الكاتبة السودانية ليلى أبو العلا، المترجمة، يقدم من خلال تصوير البطلة العربية المسلمة كآخر، وكذلك من خلال تصورها الذاتي كإمرأة أخرى في بلدين مختلفين (اسكتلندا والسودان). يتجلى موضعها كأنثى أخرى في مشاهد مختلفة في جميع أنحاء السرد مما يفتح المجال لهذه الأسئلة: كيف يتم تصوير البطلة الأنثى على أنها المرأة العربية المسلمة الأخرى في كلا السياقين؟ كيف تؤثر هذه الرؤية كمسلمة أخرى على تصورها الذاتي كإمرأة أخرى؟ لذلك يحاول البحث الحالي الإجابة على هذه الأسئلة المطروحة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الآخر، نظرية نسوية، معتقدات بين جنسين، سيطرة الذكورية، نظام السيادة الأبوية.

Représentations du genre : *La femme arabe musulmane comme Autre dans Le Roman de Leila Aboulela «La Traductrice»*

Résumé

Le roman de Leila Aboulela, La Traductrice, présente la perception de la femme arabe musulmane dans l'image de l'autre à travers le portrait de l'héroïne L'arabe musulmane, ainsi que par sa perception de soi comme l'autre femme dans deux pays différents (Ecosse et Soudan). Son positionnement de genre se manifeste dans diverses scènes du récit, ouvrant ainsi la porte à ces questions: Comment le protagoniste féminin est-elle décrite comme l'autre femme musulmane arabe dans les deux contextes? Comment cette vision en tant que l'autre femme musulmane affecte-t-elle sa perception en tant que Femme autre ?cette étude tentera de répondre à ces questions.

Mots-clés: *L'autre, théorie féministe, croyances de genre, domination masculine, patriarcat.*

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Introduction

Gender is a multilevel system of difference with social, cultural and psychological rather than biological theoretical conceptualizations. It refers to how cultures represent and organize sexual differences in a way that leads to social relations based on "masculine" and "feminine" perspectives. In this sense, gender is related to the social organization of sexual difference and biological characterization and involves social constructions and representations⁽¹⁾. Since gender is a system for constituting difference and organizing inequality based on that difference, gender identities contribute to the construction of selves and Others. Consequently, men and women are categorized into two different categories by virtue of their specific distinguishable characteristics or "gender displays"⁽²⁾ that lead to the construction of their masculine and feminine natures and the categorization of women as the different Other. Thus, the Arab Muslim female Other has become a current theme in Arab Anglophone diaspora literature.

Arab Anglophone Diaspora literature is the writings of Arab migrant writers, who have experienced the life of exile in foreign countries, which are initially strange to them. They are pioneers in reflecting the difficulty of living in-between two cultures and struggling to reconcile differences that exist between two different worlds in their writings. Arab diaspora authors focus on the social contexts and economic elements in the migrants' native country which cause them to leave, on the experience of exile and estrangement itself in the foreign country and on the mixed and reversed perception, which they may receive in the native country. They also emphasize the visions of Otherness, racism and marginalization, the sense of rootlessness and loneliness and the search for identity which can result from displacement and cultural diversity. Likewise, Arab women diaspora writers take the responsibility of treating these themes from their female perspectives.

There has been a growing body of Arab Anglophone women diaspora literature that explores the issue of Otherness. The focus of much of the Arab women diaspora writings on the issue of Otherness has centred on topics such as the categorization of the female Other within the same boundaries⁽³⁾ both as a reflection of the inner struggles and stratification within their countries. Yet, in the present time, their writings can be read as a reaction to the colonial discourse, which put their colonized or ex-colonized nations into the position of either the inferior, backward and uncivilized or exotic Other. This image of the Other, which was and is still based on ignorance, cultural close-mindedness, misconceptions and misrepresentations, is well portrayed in various Arab women writers' novels: like Diana Abu-Jaber, Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela. In this regard, Arab women diaspora writers seem to focus in their writings on woman's gender Otherness.

Arab women diaspora writers, considered postcolonial authors of this century, are also deeply affected by contemporary discourses. They have greatly participated in the debate over important contemporary issues in their narratives, such as Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Selma*, Sahar Khalifah's *Wild Thorns* and Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*. Their novels have explored the subject of Otherness from different perspectives to debunk the Othering of their characters and challenge this vision of Otherness imposed on them and their nations. Although they are aware of the difficulties of bridging the gap between the Other and those who perceive them as the Other, mainly in the case of the West and the Other East, many Arab women diaspora authors seem able to offset their writings so that to narrow the distances between Others and construct a communicative bridge between them. To this end, the tradition of Anglophone Arab women writers has been vastly growing in the twentieth century, with new generations of writers determined to give women a voice and represent issues regarding feminism, identity and class from a female perspective. Arab women diaspora narratives have shed light on the concepts of the cultural and racial differences between individuals and groups; but they mainly stress the projects of gender and feminism, forging new realities and redefinitions of the self.

Interestingly, literary works, mainly novels and short stories written by Arab Anglophone

women writers, especially Arab women diaspora writers, who have brought more recognition and visibility to the Arab woman, whose identity is perceived by the Western readership as being different, peculiar, complex, and exotic because of her portrayal in the media and in the books of early Orientalists. Narratives produced by this category have often been classified under the labels of postcolonial, feminist, non-native, hybrid or Anglophone literary discourse. From fiction writers, we profile a genuine female writer from Sudan, Leila Aboulela, who is widely acknowledged to be a pioneer in Anglophone Muslim women's writing in the West. She is one of the first writers to give Muslim migrant women a voice in Anglophone Muslim literature, focusing primarily on female issues and migration. Her novel, *The Translator* (1999), is a work far ahead of its time, revolving around a young widowed Sudanese veiled woman as she attempts to negotiate her place in the world and her Muslim identity in between two different cultures; striving for self-representation, mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue. In her novel, Leila Aboulela stresses the gender position of an Arab Muslim woman, Sammar, in two different contexts: Scotland and Sudan. The considerably first long part of the novel portrays the female protagonist as the foreign Other within the Scottish society, whereas, in the second part, the female protagonist is *othered* within her native community, mainly in the eyes of her family members.

Gender differentiation is indeed pervasive in most cultures, but this differentiation is not monolithic across cultures or history. There are marked variations among cultures and throughout historical periods with respect to the specific spheres in which they occur and the degree of their accentuation. Arenas, such as the nature of occupations (childcare, household duties, sport and so on), are examples of the cultural differences and historical change that manifest the diversity of gender differentiation. In addition, gender differentiation is not monolithic within those identified as male and female. This means that though the differences that characterize men are different from those identifying women; these variations exist also within the same sex. In what follows, important theories about the concept of gender are to be presented.

Distinct theories about gender have been generally developed in gender studies to define the dimensions of the gender system. Biological gender theories perceive biological sex differences as modes of differentiation and categorization within societies. Depending on this view, sexual differences have always existed at the core of the gender category as Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis claim: "there is always some retention of static and biologist categories as explanations of the development of admittedly historically contingent gender relations. The form of gender is always regarded as the outcome of a binary and dichotomous sexual difference"⁽⁴⁾. According to these theories, sexual differences determine gender roles and attribute a social position to each sex. In this case, gender is a set of social roles based on sexual differences that put each sex in a different function, such as the woman's biological function in the bearing and rearing of children. Gunhild Hoogensen *et al* argue along similar lines that women's productive roles in carrying children, birthing, breastfeeding the future citizens of the world, has greatly connected them with family duties⁽⁵⁾. However, sexual differences are not the only gender demarcations; psychological attributes also share an important part in constructing the gender system.

The feminist psychoanalytic theory, which explains women's oppression as rooted within psychic structures and reinforced by the continual repetition or reiteration of relational dynamics formed in infancy and childhood, maintains that gender is not biological but is based on the psycho-sexual development of the individual. Feminist psychoanalytic theorists from the United States and France (Miller, Butler, Chodorow, Cixou, Irigaray, Kristiva) have been prolific in producing revisions to traditional psychoanalytic theory about women. They believe that gender inequality comes from early childhood experiences, which lead men to perceive themselves as masculine and women to perceive themselves as feminine. This notion is emphasized by Margaret Mead who clarifies that depending upon the degree to which male and female personality differences are emphasized and made distinct, the treatment given to

boys and girls from infancy will strengthen the differences between the sexes⁽⁶⁾. So, these psycho-sexual attributes lead to a social system that creates the binary male/female, which, in turn, influences the woman self-perception as a gendered human being.

The other definition of gender is made based on a socio-cultural meaning. In this sense, gender is understood as the product of social processes that embody the cultural connotation of masculinity and femininity and, thus, distinguish the persons' gender from their sex. Many gender scholars (Lorber, Ridgeway and Risman, to name only a few) have focused on the concept of gender as a social phenomenon. They argued that gender is not primarily an identity or role that is taught in childhood and enacted in family relations. Instead, it is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and organizing social relations of inequality based on that difference⁽⁷⁾. This belief is also shared by James Wilfrid Vander Zanden, who claims that for most people "There is a good fit between their anatomy and their gender identity. Boys generally come to behave in ways their culture labels "masculine", and girls learn to be feminine"⁽⁸⁾. Therefore, like other systems of difference and inequality, such as those based on race or class and gender involves cultural beliefs and social roles that determine the social perception and patterns of gender behaviours and gender roles that create the individuals' gender identities. Consequently, the perception of women in most cultures has been based on certain gender stereotypes⁽⁹⁾ that manifest her Otherness. These gender stereotypes and cultural beliefs, as the cultural rules for enacting gender, are important components of the definition of gender differences.

Another theory that contributes to the definition of gender is feminist theory. The development of feminist theory has usually used the concept of patriarchy as an analytical and explanatory mode. This assumption is based on the specificity of the social relations between men and women and the universal existence of male domination over women. More precisely, the distinctive nature of patriarchy focuses on the relationship between men and women in a situation of female subordination. Patriarchy is defined as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women"⁽¹⁰⁾. In this respect, the woman question has always been related to the issue of patriarchy since this question includes the causes of sexual inequality and male domination. In patriarchal societies, the woman is a totally dependent creature that is unable to take care of herself or take decisions in her life unless under the supervision of a man. In this context, some approaches have employed historical perspectives linked with materialist assumptions to demonstrate the inevitable conflict of interests between men and women. They have tried to historicize the concept of patriarchy by exploring the relations between patriarchy and the different modes of production or economic processes. They have argued that patriarchy is not only a psychic process but also a social and economic structure⁽¹¹⁾. Consequently, the mere fact of being a man holds symbolic capital and specific gender representations exercised over women.

1- Gender Representation in *The Translator*:

The central issue of the Arab Muslim female Othering appears in the novel through the perception of the female protagonist as Other. In addition to her status as a different cultural and racial Other, the female protagonist is *othered* in both settings (Scotland and Sudan) by certain gender beliefs. She is perceived as the Other woman in the eyes of her aunt Mahasen, brother Waleed, an old friend of the family, Am Ahmad, and more vividly the male protagonist Rae Iles. These gender beliefs affect her self-representation as a woman in both contexts. In Scotland, the female protagonist's gender beliefs are depicted through her subordination on the presence of a man in her life. After the death of her husband, Tarig, in a car accident, all her expectations were based on an opportunity for a second marriage. Therefore, as soon as she starts a romantic relationship with her boss Rae, she directly follows her feelings toward marriage and proposes for him to convert to Islam to fulfil this dream. In expecting his agreement and convergence, she asserts her gender identity as a woman in need of a man. Another portrait of the importance of marriage in her life is her vision towards

Fareed Khalifa, Rae's Palestinian academic friend. The narrator confirms that she envies Fareed because he is married and has a family, while she is living alone without the company of a man. So, besides her gender beliefs, marriage is considered as half of her Islamic religion. Thus, all these deep-rooted beliefs in her Arab Muslim culture and religion contribute to her gender Otherness.

Consequently, the protagonist's position as the female Other is portrayed in the novel through her dependence on the presence of the man in her life. Without a man, Sammar feels her life empty, and without the company of a man, she is lonely. This need for the Other man attributes to her the feature of the subordinate female Other. Generally, this status of subordination, which is emphasized by Sammar's acceptance to marry Am Ahmad after the death of her husband, reflects her need for the company and protection of man. Sammar's desperate need for being with a man is inserted deeply inside her. When her aunt refused her marriage from Am Ahmad, Sammar justified her acceptance choking the words "He's religious,.....he feels a duty towards widows...." (13). Again her subordination on the presence of a man in her life is reflected in her feelings toward Rae. The narrator presents Sammar from inside as follows: "Inside Sammar there was froth like that, a froth that could rise if she started to speak. Then he [Rae] would see it and maybe go away, when all she wanted was for him to remove it so that she could be clear. It would be easy for him to make her clear, she thought, as easy as untying a ribbon." (7). This feeling illustrates her inability to change her inner hardness and her dependency on the man in her life. The importance of the man's presence in her life is also reflected in Sammar's feminine behaviour. After the death of her husband, Sammar neglected totally herself as a woman. She lives in a Spartan; she has not taken care of herself, nor has she bought any new clothing, since becoming a widow (37). The narrator states: "Since Tarig [her first husband] died she had not bought anything new. She had not noticed time moving past..." (67). Yet, as soon as she meets Rae and her feelings towards him blossom, she starts to care for herself again and her life slowly returns (67). Sammar's behaviour confirms the notion that "for a woman, as soon as she can believe she is using herself with someone else and for someone else, her own self moves into action and seems satisfying and worthwhile"⁽¹²⁾. The novel also emphasizes the protagonist's gender portrait through her feelings that she is renewing herself with someone else (Rae Isles) and for someone else that makes her own self move into action: "She ran up the stairs that she had often taken a step at a time, dragging her grief. Now the staircase had a different aura, a different light" (41). So, her relationship with a man reveals her status as the female Other in the novel.

Taking into consideration the differences between cultures in defining her roles and status, it was demonstrated in the introduction that the woman has generally been portrayed as the Other in reference to man. She is considered as different from the norm (man), weak and emotional. In comparison to Rae, Sammar views him as a super hero for his ability to come back to Africa again and again when this continent caused so much pain to him. He buried his son from his first marriage there. She asked him "How can you like a place, visit it again, study its culture and history when something horrible happened to you there" (64). For her, living in a place that holds so much painful souvenirs needs a strong appeal that she lacks as a sensitive woman. This appeal is reflected in her decision to write her resignation from her job at the university because of the break of her romantic relationship with Rae as if places have no meaning without the presence of a man. In Scotland, the status of the Arab Muslim female protagonist as Other is not based only on the perception of the man, but on other women's perception as well. The narrator clarifies that "In this country, when she spoke to people, they seemed wary, on their guard as if any minute she would say something out of place, embarrassing" (6). Hence, her Othering status is also intensified in the eyes of other women by being an immigrant woman.

Another vision as the Other is mainly linked to the status of the protagonist as an Arab immigrant woman in a Western country. The intimate relationship with the male protagonist,

Rae, gives the portrayal of Sammar as the migrant Arab Muslim Other. The narrator depicts her gender differences when she went to Rae's office to ask him to convert to get married because it is unusual for an Arab Muslim woman to make a marriage proposal for a man. The narrator depicts the situation as the following: 'if they [Sammar and Rae] were not a man and a woman, if they were pure friends, if all that was between them was clear air, she would have been patient' (175). Another vision as the immigrant female Other is based on her role as a woman in the domestic sphere. This vision is generally based on a traditional gender discourse of domesticity and the primary role of immigrant women at home. Geoffery Nash argues that "the traditional gender discourse still presents the ongoing definition of immigrant women from the perspective of domesticity. To the extent that,...her family status and a traditional model of a married woman, dependent, passive and limited to the domestic space, stands out"⁽¹³⁾. Nash's quotation explains that the perception of immigrant women as Other is stereotypically evoked under the notion of family, maternity and caregivers. In the case of the novel's protagonist, her traditional role as a housewife is reflected even in the unconsciousness of the male protagonist, who narrates to her a dream, where he enters a room and finds her at a home, cooking (96). The novel also focuses on the foreign woman's traditional role when the protagonist went with her friend Yasmin to visit Rae in his house. There, the first thing the protagonist was attracted to is the house that gives her the sense of domesticity so that she directly moves to the kitchen to do the dishwashing(19). So, the protagonist's perception as the Arab Muslim female Other in Scotland is stressed by her being an Arab Muslim immigrant woman in this foreign context.

Consequently, the discourse of gender also becomes patriarchal in the course of the protagonist's life in Scotland. If the power relations between men and women are patriarchal, they soon become emphasized in the love relationship between Sammar and Rae which is more surprising as it contracts the stereotypical expectations of a cross-cultural relationship with an Arab Muslim woman. Rae, with a patriarchal vision, uses Sammar for the gratification of her exoticism and the self-confirmation of his objective views about the Orient, while Sammar clearly hopes for his conversion to marry her. Rae attracts Sammar, invites her for a meeting in the "Winter Garden", and initiates their first contact. Sammar, thus, confesses that her attraction to him was due to his being the initiator in attracting her attention, i.e., due to the male gaze towards her: "It was because of the way you looked at me" (127). As a matter of fact, this has to do with their different economic and social positions, but traditional gender roles are clearly portrayed in this relationship. Even Sammar's reactions that stem from her patriarchal culture confirm her gender role by trying to express her feelings indirectly as to cook for him soup and to visit him at the hospital. This also confirms the patriarchal hierarchy that results from traditional power structures. Rae, who is aware of his privileged status as well as her homesickness as a woman, appears patronizing towards her. He gives himself the right as a man to take the position of judging her and her status and taking decisions instead of her. Without caring for her personal needs, he suggests to her to be a translator in an anti-terrorist programme in Egypt. He tells her that "I thought you were homesick" (126) and that was the reason why he suggested to her to be a translator in that programme to go from there to Sudan. This patronizing relationship pictures the protagonist's position as the Arab Muslim female Other.

Additionally, through the novel, Rae seems to hold this patriarchal vision towards woman. Rae's first marriage in Morocco was based on his interest in Oriental exoticism which pushed him to approach Amelia, his first wife, (a half-Spanish and half-Moroccan woman) and as a man, he attracted her into a romantic relationship that ends by an irresponsible marriage after being pregnant. The narrator states that: "He was in love, abroad, and she [Amelia] was half Spanish, exotic. He had come all the way from Edinburgh especially for this" (61). This marriage mirrors his vision of Otherness toward Amelia as a woman. Besides, in his second marriage, he could not support the successful career of his wife, who was a compatriot and a definite "ambitious woman", working for the UN, mainly located in Geneva. In this

relationship, too, patriarchal preferences feature intensively. Rae's second wife bears the years they lived in Cairo for Rae to pursue his Islamic research, whereas he cannot sacrifice for relocation to Switzerland where his wife and his teenage daughter's mother is based, and, thus, an arbitrary divorce after bitter quarrels ends their marriage. Again, this unequal power relation between man and woman manifests itself at the end of the novel's first chapter, which is simultaneously the initial end of Sammar and Rae's romantic relationship. The end of this relation is also determined by the male protagonist, who not only initially refused to convert but shouted in an authoritarian voice at her "go away, get out from here" (129). This behaviour manifests a relationship of domination that affects the protagonist's life as a woman in reference to man, who determines not only her staying in Scotland but her departure from it.

This vision of the Arab Muslim female Other also affects Sammar's life when she is back home. The first time she returned to Sudan after the death of her husband, a friend of the family, Am Ahmed, who is much older than her and married to two wives, proposed to marry her. Her aunt describes him as "you want to get married again...and to whom? A semi-illiterate with two wives and children your age" (23). This proposal reflects a vision of Otherness towards the widow Sammar. It is the vision of the weak widow who needs urgently the support of a man. Moreover, when Sammar is back home, after her separation with Rae, she is *othered* as a woman in her patriarchal family. Her brother, Waleed, told her from a patriarchal view that he is the only one left from their family, and he cannot receive her and Amir in his home (152). This confession is a confirmation of the vision of the Muslim patriarchal societies that consider the widow woman as a broken and helpless creature, who cannot care for herself and, therefore, must be under the care of her father or brother. Sammar's brother seems also to agree with her aunt in deciding for her through arguing against her resignation (149), and, again, he cautions her that staying with her in-laws means that she does not want to get married again (152). This vision as the weak widow contributes to her categorization as the gender Other within her community though she has nowhere to go. Sammar has to live in her aunt and mother-in-law's house, where her gender roles manifest themselves in different scenes, such as mothering her son, Amir, and caring for her cousin's children and doing the house cleaning and cooking. Her aunt, Mahasen, seems to exercise a symbolic gender power on Sammar's presence in her house which conveys the image of her aunt as a household woman embracing gender beliefs. She is portrayed as a household leader and Sammar describes her as: "My aunt is a strong woman....a leader really (7). Her aunt's personality, thus, accentuates her status as the Other within her family.

Her status as the Arab Muslim female Other is also portrayed through her aunt's attitudes as a woman brought up in a patriarchal society that, in its turn, puts the woman in the position of the silent Other and suppresses her acts and choices as explained by Diana Tietjens Meyers who states that patriarchal societies treat woman not only as a complete member of the society who is given an inferior position, but they consider women as inferior beings and they severely constrain women's choosing and acting⁽¹⁴⁾. This view is reflected not only in Sammar's aunt's refusal to marry again, but also in her decision not to stay in Sudan and going back to Scotland with her son in spite of the loneliness that she endures there. She told her in a decisive voice: "I'll never give permission for something like this [her marriage]" (23); and added: "You should go back to England, work there and send us things" (169). Her aunt seems also to hold an inferior vision toward her. She once blames her: "All this is because you are useless....A few children and you don't know how to handle them. I don't know what happened to you. In the past you were lively and strong, now you've just become an idiot And content to wear others' clothes, without any pride" (169). Hence, both Sammar's brother and aunt participate into putting her in the position of the silent Other by deciding instead of her because, in many cultures, women's voices are frequently silenced, and their thoughts and opinions are not valued⁽¹⁵⁾. So, this silent Other can be considered as the status of Sammar not only in Sudan, but in Scotland as well. In this setting, the narrator describes her as "she had to

be silent. Use her teeth and lips to keep silent” (45). The portrait of the Arab Muslim woman as the silent Other confirms her status of despair and loss of meaning in her life.

On the other hand, her gender status is also manifested in the loss of the focus of her life as soon as her relationship with a man breaks. For the protagonist, the disruption of a relationship with a man means not just a loss of a relationship but something closer to a total loss of self. When her husband died in a car crash at a young age, she was not only suffering from the feeling that her purpose in life was smashed, but she felt devastated. The narrator describes her state of mind after her husband's death as: “ [she] had come here and her focus became the hospital room, watching from the window people doing what she couldn't do. Four year's convalescing” (28) .The only motivation that she believes to make her keep on going is to get married again. She told her aunt “I want to get married again, I need focus in my life” (28). This expresses her feeling like a half person, lacking total satisfaction and wanting another person to complete it though she is still able to get some satisfaction from her own half. This means that being deprived of the company of a man is like being a person who does not matter. This feeling is manifested in her resignation that reinforces her status as the Other woman which conveys that the loss of man means the loss of the meaning of her life in Scotland. She herself utters this notion: “living there wasn't a great success” (149) for the only reason of losing Rae as if she measures her life success by his presence. She even considers coming back to Scotland after her break with Rae as a painful experience that she is unable to take, and, thus, a resignation from her job is obligatory. Moreover, her status as the female Other is manifested through her fear as a woman to lose the attention of a man. The narrator explains that “[Sammar] was afraid that he [Rae] would be angry with her, impatient, bored” (57) because she cannot accept to go out with him. Thus, the rationalization for Arab Muslim woman's Otherness has been justified by notions of gender stereotypes that define her roles and herself-perception.

2- Arab Muslim Woman's Self-perception:

In most human communities, the position of woman as Other leads to her self-perception's Othering⁽¹⁶⁾. Though women's reaction to their gender Otherness confirms the heterogeneity of women, it manifests itself consciously or unconsciously into various women's behaviours. It also demarcates the conceptions held about themselves, their roles in their families and societies and their image of their position in the world. From this, it is clear that man is still shaping the image of woman in different societies, and women are still accepting this image even under the veiling conception that man's superiority is broken and woman's gendered view has become just a myth. Toril Moi stresses this notion in her claim that a woman defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in the world and the way in which she makes something of what the world makes of her⁽¹⁷⁾. Being members of a society that puts women in the position of the Other, women willy-nilly are affected by this vision imposed on them by their societies. The general picture of women reveals that they live between the image, which that society mirrors to them and their real feelings of being women. Starting from this vision, women tend to either accept unwillingly this image or to revolt against it starting from challenging their self-perception.

In *The Translator*, the female protagonist's self-perception as Other is depicted in two different contexts. These two pictures do not only exist in the novel under study but appear in a hybridized and utterly complex way in the characters of Leila Aboulela's work. Firstly, Aboulela's novel provides a picture of the woman's self-perception as Other in reference to man through the relationship between her male and female characters in Scotland. It portrays how man's view towards woman, as Other, different from him and under his domination, affects her self-perception. This status is emphasized by the protagonist's emotional crisis after her husband's death. The loss of her life's balance, which depends on man, induces her to abandon her son and search for a recuperative relationship through a second marriage to an illiterate elder man, Am Ahmad Ali Yasseen, who is an old friend to her family and already married to two wives. Her acceptance conveys the image of the female's subordinated status

and her need for the existence of a man in her life. When this proposal of marriage, in the African setting, was refused by her aunt, the protagonist came back to Aberdeen where she entered a love relationship with the male protagonist. This illustrates Sammar's self-perception as lonely and forlorn woman without the support of a man after her husband's death. Therefore, being a woman, the protagonist conveys an image of a feminine nature that makes her always in need of a man to fulfil her personality, complete her identity and construct a family because women generally identify themselves in their role in their families, rather than addressing their achievements. Illustrating this vision, the female protagonist claims that she wants to be another Mahasen (her aunt and mother-in-law) when she grows up, has babies, gets fat, sits with one leg crossed over the other and complains to life-long friends about the horrific rise in prices (26). Another portrait of her self-perception as Other woman is depicted in her vision toward her neighbour Nahla. The narrator opines: "Nahla stepped out of the pool...Pretty ankles, painted toenails, all the preparations for a pride. Sammar was like that once, years ago, years ago before Scotland, before Tarig died." (139). This notion is also stressed in the text when Nahla informs Sammar that she looks years younger than her cousin Hanan, but this compliment on her looks hardened her inside and Sammar replied: What was the use? (138). This implies that her sense and view of herself have no importance if they were not appreciated by man.

The female protagonist's gender Otherness affects her self-perception as Other. Generally, the vision of society toward woman as different from man is reflected in her self-perception as Other. It can be said that a woman finds herself, either consciously or unconsciously, reacting according to the image given to her by her society. When women encounter prejudice and discrimination, they may collude with the system and believe they deserve it, so that they feel devalued by external sources and devalue themselves⁽¹⁸⁾. Thus, the female protagonist seems to hold this self-image that is imposed on her. She asserts that "to him [Rae] I must have always looked helpless and forlorn" (127). She also asserts her self-representation as a woman by thinking that "it is clear now, it is so clear, he does not love me enough, I am not beautiful enough. I am not feminine enough coming here to ask him to marry me when I should have waited to be asked" (28). Her self-perception as different Other is also reflected in her dreams and hallucinations that fill the novel. Her unconsciousness gives the image given to her from the society and from her position in reference to the man. In one of her dreams, she saw herself as a child among adults and Rae was one of them. As soon as Rae puts her hand on her shoulder, she became perfect and smooth (184). In another dream, Sammar was a small woman in a room full with "people bigger than her, older than her...Rae came towards her and then brushed past her, distracted, unaware of her because she was too young and too short for him" (166). These dreams demonstrate the protagonist's self-image as a weak woman who holds a low rank in reference to man. Her self-image as Other is also portrayed in her fantasies. In one of them, she thinks of his needs without mentioning her owns as a woman. She thinks that: "She should make him happy; she could do so much for him" (118). The narrator also describes in details her fantasy of marrying Rae and living with him as a happy family. "She wanted to cook for him different things, and then stand in the kitchen and think, I should change my clothes...Mhairi (Rae's daughter) could come from school and live with them" (118). So, the protagonist unconsciously takes the position as the Other and acts according to it.

On the other hand, Sammar's self-image as Arab Muslim Other woman is also manifested in reference to other Western women. Her gender identity that is co-defined by the Oriental Islamic culture and the experience of the contact with the Western Scottish culture accentuates her differences and her self-perception as the Other. In comparison to Western women, who privilege liberation and freedom, the female Sammar perceives herself as holding a limited space of freedom as a woman coming from a Muslim culture. From where she comes, "woman reputation is fragile as a match stick" (57) and "woman's virginity is prized" (19). In addition to this view, belonging to an Oriental culture is another criterion for

her gendered self-image. When Dian informed Sammar about her too many late nights and parties with friends (71), her self-consciousness of her differences moves to the surface; she confesses that:

If she had behaved in that way, the following morning...will go to school...bruised eyes.” because in Sammar’s patriarchal culture, woman is not allowed to spend nights alone outside; otherwise she is violently punished. Once, Sammar compared herself to Dian, one of Rae’s Ph.D. students at the University of Aberdeen. The narrator clarifies that “Sammar was conscious of how young Dian was, nearly eight years her junior and so independent in comparison to how she had been at that age” (71).

Hence, the portrait of the female protagonist as Other is accentuated by being an immigrant Muslim woman in a foreign context. Additionally, despite being in a Western culture, Sammar’s behaviours are also determined by her Arab Muslim culture that forbids relations between man and woman outside marriage frame. Consequently, her differentness is manifested in her fear of the gossip that may spread about her relation with Rae, “Gossip, tastier than average because they were unlikely couple” (116). This fear of smashing her reputation reveals her gender differences from the other Western women.

The protagonist’s status as an Other in the eyes of her own community mirrors itself in her self-perception as being outside the lives of her family members. On the basis of their vision, she acts and reacts, transmitting to them a self-representation of Otherness. When her aunt asked her “how much have you been contributing to the house” (169), Sammar answered: “not much” her voice flat, obedient, answering how Mahasen wanted her to answer (169). Also, the protagonist does not only arrive at acknowledging her position as being withdrawn and avoided from their lives, but she initially reaches a self-definition as an Other since it is contended that the individual’s consciousness arises in a social context. This notion is stressed by Cooley’s concept of the looking-glass self (5). The protagonist states that: “she was the one who had become too sensitive. She was the one who had been away for too long” (147). This feeling of being different is also clarified by her claim: “She must shield [her eyes] with blue lenses and wait for them to forget like her bones had forgotten and her skin” (136). So, the protagonist acknowledges her status as Other and unconsciously manifests it in some behaviours, such as serving others.

Serving Others is a basic principle around which the protagonist’s life in Sudan is organized. It introduces her self-perception as being an Other and emphasizes that the protagonist reflects the mirror image of her family by staying at the margin through her focus on the traditional gender role of doing the housework, caring for the children and serving the family. Helen O’Grady argues that: “Caring for others often has been at the expense of women’s own needs, desires and goals”⁽¹⁹⁾. The protagonist, thus, has unconsciously developed the sense that she had to attune herself to the needs, wishes, and desires of others (the members of her family) as if the others are the important ones or important than herself and the guides to her action⁽²⁰⁾. Sammar performs all the housework, even taking care of their cousin’s children. Once, her brother expressed to her this notion: “Here you are holding Amir and Hanan’s children. Didn’t aunt Mahasen fire the maid as soon as you come back?” (150). It even seems that the protagonist unconsciously clings to this role as “she wanted to escape into cleaning the room, sweeping up the rice that was scattered on the table and the floor” (169). Hence, this role of serving others stems from her self-perception as Other within her family and assures her status as the Arab female Other.

Conclusion:

The present paper is concerned with the status of the Arab Muslim woman as Other. It gives great importance to gender otherness attributed to the Arab Muslim female protagonist in Leila Aboulela’s novel *The Translator*. The overall picture of the novel shows an Arab Muslim woman, who is *othered* in both British and Sudanese societies. The representations of Otherness are attributed to the female protagonist whose different culture, religious beliefs, and gender attributes are the subtle characteristics that make her appear different from man

and the majority of Western women.

This paper also focuses, mainly, on the different theories in the field of gender studies, since through human history, women in different societies and cultures, have encountered prejudice and categorization as Other different from man. Man has always been the center to her differences and vision as Other in all male dominant societies. Arab Muslim women have traditionally been *othered* due to some stereotypes and representations endowed upon them as different from men. If one examines gender stereotypes about women, it becomes evident that women have been portrayed as emotionally unbalanced, irresponsible and dependent. These stereotypes confirm the notion that women have been endowed with specific representations that limit their space of existence as equal citizens and put them in the position of the Other. In short, woman, when perceived as an Other, is usually put in a lower positioning, a subordinate to the masculine Other.

To conclude, it is at the core of the matter to consider not only the Other's actual image which is depicted in the novel, or the way it presents them, but also to reconsider the reality that exclusions and subordinations are linked to produce diverse outcomes with regard to the differences of individuals and their stratification within the different major divisions that construct them. This principle induced the approach with the necessity to examine the protagonist's status as the Other woman. Her gender Otherness is portrayed in the novel in two juxtaposed parts. In Scotland, this criterion attributes to her the vision as the Arab Muslim Other, whereas back in her Sudanese community, she is *othered* as a different "Westernised woman". More particularly, the challenge of the discourse of the Arab Muslim woman as Other, has a deep and a far-reaching prospect. In both Western and African contexts, gender displays, gender roles and gender stereotypes are at the core of the process of Otherness since they structure all the categorization and marginalization of woman as Other. The depiction of gender Otherness is used both for the manifestation of the woman's differences and her stratification as well for her gendered self-perception. In the author's perspective, being the Other in the eyes of the other man and in her own eyes, the Arab Muslim woman has to challenge the characteristics that attribute to her this vision of Otherness or this "naturalness" of the hegemony of the man in both Western and Eastern contexts.

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