

# Reconstructing Identity in the Diaspora: Trans-cultural Self-Assertion and Arab Muslim Anglophone Women Writers: The Case of Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and Randa Abdel Fattah's *Does my Head Look Big in This?*

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## Abstract

*This article sheds light on how the Arab diasporic hybrid identity has been shaped by place. It also emphasizes the importance of memory for Arab Muslim Anglophone women writers, who turn to this compensation strategy to overcome the painful sense of loneliness, in the "host land." The purpose of this study is to show how the protagonists of Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) and Randa Abdel Fattah's *Does my Head Look Big in This?* (2005) skillfully define themselves and dispel the myths about the Arab culture in the West.*

**Keywords:** *Identity, diaspora, hybridity, Anglo-Arab, women writers, memory.*

إعادة بناء الهوية في الشتات: تأكيد الذات عبر الثقافات والكاتبات العربيات الإنجليزات المسلمات: نموذج، المترجمة  
لليلي أبو العلاء، وهل يبدو رأسي كبيراً في هذا لرندة عبد الفتاح

## ملخص

يلقي هذا المقال الضوء على كيفية تشكيل الهوية العربية الهجينة في الشتات وكيفية تأثرها بالمكان. كما يؤكد على أهمية الذاكرة للكاتبات العربيات المسلمات الناطقات باللغة الإنجليزية، اللاتي يلجأن إلى هذه الاستراتيجية التعويضية للتغلب على الإحساس المؤلم بالوحدة، في "البلد المضيف". والغرض من هذه الدراسة هو إظهار كيف تثبت بطلات الروائيتين المترجمة (1999) لليلي أبو العلاء وهل يبدو رأسي كبيراً في هذا (2005) لرندة عبد الفتاح بمهارة إمكانية تعريف أنفسهن الشتات وتبديد كل الأكاذيب حول الثقافة العربية في بلاد الغرب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: هوية، شتات، تهجين، كاتبات أنجلو عرب، ذاكرة.

## *Femmes Ecrivains Anglophones Arabo-Musulmanes: Le Cas de La Traductrice de Leila Aboulela et de Randa Abdel Fattah Ma Tête Semble-t-elle Grosse?*

## Résumé

Cet article met en lumière la manière dont l'identité hybride de la diaspora Arabe a été façonnée par le lieu. Il souligne également l'importance de la mémoire pour les écrivaines Arabes Musulmanes Anglophones, qui se tournent vers cette stratégie de compensation pour surmonter le douloureux sentiment de solitude, dans le «pays d'accueil». L'objet de cette étude est de montrer comment les protagonistes de *La Traductrice* (1999) de Leila Aboulela et *Ma Tête Semble-t-elle Grosse?* de Randa Abdel Fattah (2005) se définissent habilement et dissipent les mythes sur la culture Arabe en Occident.

**Mots-clés:** *Identité, diaspora, hybridité, anglo-arabe, femmes écrivains, mémoire.*

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## Introduction:

Trying to shatter the image which pictures the Arab woman as a victimized "other," Arab diasporic women writers mark a new chapter in the history of Arab literature written in English. By employing writing as a way of resistance and as an act of self-representation, they negotiate their hyphenated identities, and re-articulate new images of the Arab hybrid female self. They positively engage in a responsive dialogue that opens up new horizons and establishes new spaces of defiance and empowerment. They also contest Orientalist stereotypical images that place the Arab woman within the limits and confinements of female oppression.

The article tries to answer the following questions, what is the significance of being an Arab and a writer in the West? How is Arab identity constructed in the West? How is it shaped by immigration and place? What do the values of Arabness and Islam mean to those immigrants? It is important to emphasize that Arab migrant writers cover the representational burden of commitment toward their cultural and religious values as well as their home and gender issues. As minority writers, they display an awareness of their hybrid and hyphenated identities, through the deterritorialization of the English language to achieve the specific effect of travelling across languages and cultures.

A great deal of work has been set forward on the notions of identity and migration in Arab diasporic literature. To name but a few, Wail Hassan's, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* examines how Arab émigrés from Amine Rihani and Gibran Khalil Gibran to Edward Said and Leila Ahmed contest and counter the problem of Orientalism, and how Arab writers have portrayed their migrant experiences, performing the role of interpreters, negotiators, and mediators between cultures, resulting in the shaping of new identities. Leila el Maleh's *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* contains essays on Arab-American, Arab-British, and Arab-Australian writers. Youssef Awad's "Cartographies of Identities: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab-British and Arab-American Women Writers," compares the works of contemporary Arab-British and Arab-American women novelists intending to delineate a poetics of the more nascent Arab-British literature.

This study intends to create a brand new fusion between Arab-British and Arab-Australian cultures as it brings for the first time Aboulela and Abd El Fattah together into one work that deals with their most outstanding writings. This study will bring to the surface new connections by broadening the angle of current investigations on Arab diasporic literature, through comparing works by Arab-British and Arab-Australian authors who write in English. The present article is also important because it contributes to the field of diaspora and adds a new understanding to the notion of cultural identity. Since this article's focus is on Arab Muslim Anglophone women's experiences, we will rely on cultural, diasporic, and transnational approaches in dealing with the selected works of Aboulela and Abdel Fattah.

Since collective identity formation turns around cultural dynamism rather than closure, Anglo-Arab women writers are mainly concerned with representing their identities in terms of how they see themselves and how the world sees them. They further display a deep understanding of the diversity of their hybrid identities. In this context, identity construction is characterized by an "identity crisis"<sup>(1)</sup> and perceived as a production, always in process, and never complete.

These women writers affirm their identities by the rhetorical re-establishment of the repressive hierarchical order by means of subverting and excluding that which threatens them. The production of their cultural identities can be mainly formed with the resistance of pre-existent definitions, and the substitution of "negative images with positive ones."<sup>(2)</sup>

## 1-Diaspora and Cultural Identity:

According to Grossberg, Cultural identity is shaped by a combination of overlapping dimensions: "difference, fragmentation, hybridity, border and diaspora." The notion of

difference represents a negative relationship between the subaltern other and the dominant subject. The former aims to subvert the latter, and the marginalized necessarily becomes an important part in constituting the dominant's identity. The "other" needs to destabilize the language of the powerful to establish a more "stable identity." Fragmentation stresses the plurality of identities, and the extent to which these contradictory identities can exist as defining features of one's selfhood. Hybridity defines the "third space" or the frontier presence where the migrant character does not have a clearly defined place, but rather lives in an in-between space. This is a productive space that engenders new possibilities of existence because this "third space" is more important to the issue of hybridity than the origin from which that space emerged. Rather than being exclusive, it suggests a site of inclusion that "initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation."<sup>(3)</sup> Border-crossing is another term linked to hybridity in which people are obliged to live between the two worlds. This idea echoes W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness," is a complex process that inescapably shapes the diasporic self that constantly strives to reconcile between the two worlds. The plurality of a cultural tissue generates cultural likeness and difference. This idea simply suggests a model of doubleness, where identity is the result of dividing the self into two halves; one develops a link with the host country, while the other maintains attachment with the country of origin, and then, fusing the two halves of that divided self. T.S. Eliot suggests,

The culture which develops on the new soil must therefore be bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture: it will be complicated sometimes by whatever relations are established with some native race and further by immigration from other than the original source. In this way, peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash appear<sup>(4)</sup>.

Since the diaspora discourse "represents an experience of displacement," the diasporic subject resorts to nostalgic memory where the power of remembering plays an important role in healing the wounded self of the migrant character. The displaced people maintain a strong attachment or affiliation to their homeland which allows them to resist the act of obliteration that might result from the standardized or normalized "processes of forgetting, assimilating, and distancing."<sup>(5)</sup> This sense of "collective memory" offers a healing process from the negative feelings of suffering, loss, marginality and exile experienced in the host country. This adaptive strategy of survival provides the diasporic community with strength and hope through which they can resist the sense of alienation by maintaining strong ties with the country of origin. Whether through a real or symbolic homeland utopian vision, the diasporic subject often holds a need to return to the original land when conditions are appropriate in order to escape the dystopia of the world in which they live. This return might not always be a real one, but the diasporic character is afforded the opportunity to re-live some joyous moments which is allowed through this myth of the return<sup>(6)</sup>.

This idea of collective memory is extensively reflected in the writings of Arab Anglophone women writers, who –through the production of their literary works- have made the case of the Arab woman more visible. By refusing to surrender to such wrong and untrue definitions of the Arab woman, these women writers needed to make a clear distinction between the Western depiction of the Arab Muslim woman and her true identity. Committed to authentically represent an accurate image, these writers adopted Arab and Islamic feminist ideology which has emerged because of the failure of Western feminism to reflect and address Arab and Muslim women's needs and concerns.

Questions of identity and diaspora have often been interrelated with gender issues where diasporic women writers need to re-appropriate the androcentric metaphors of travel which claim that travel narrative is often associated with men. The gendering ideology of travel literature would render women's diasporic narratives invisible and would practice an exclusionary discourse on women. These women writers subvert and resist the traditional fixed meanings of travel, and as such, they deviate from the normalized male-centred thinking. Anglophone women writers of Arab descent who deal with the theme of migration

in their texts do not abandon their identity, rather they affirm their right to establish their cultural and religious roots by employing the travel narrative that focuses on the encounter between East-West.

The question of women's diasporic identities and cultural hybridity is manifested not only through the thematic concerns of the writers but is also shown through the linguistic use of code switching which creates a multilingual and multicultural individuality. As trans-lingual writers they create a unique selfhood by yoking language, subjectivity, and mixture. The process of "language alteration" or "language mixing" demonstrates how code switching results from a crucial understanding of the intertwined link between form and meaning to create "composite selves." These composite selves highlight the doubleness of national and linguistic identities -previously placed at the margin- by stressing the fluidity and mixture of language and identity. Weaving both languages together, the writers make a "graphic statement" of their "dual identities."<sup>(7)</sup>

Linguistic hybridization is not only the mixture of two languages, but the encounter of two different cultural and linguistic individuals, groups, consciousnesses, historical moments, across time and space. As Bakhtin confirms,

The [...] hybrid is not only double-voiced and double-accented [...] but is also double-linguaged; for in it there are not only (and not even so much) two individual consciousnesses, two voices, two accents, as there are [doublings of] socio-linguistic, consciousnesses, two epochs [...] that come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance. [...] It is the collision between differing points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms [...] such unconscious hybrids have been at the same time profoundly productive historically: they are pregnant with potential for new world views, with new 'internal forms' for perceiving the world in words<sup>(8)</sup>.

Language crossing is a concept proposed by Ben Rampton which stands for "the use of language varieties associated with social or ethnic groups that the speaker does not normally 'belong' to." Bakhtin views "language [as] heteroglot from toptop to bottom"<sup>(9)</sup>. His analysis of the novel as a hybrid, actually, suggests not the blending of two languages, but the juxtaposition of these two languages, where what is called the "authorial language" is mixed up with some traces from the minor language. This would dismantle the authoritative, unitary language, with the aim of "illuminat[ing] one language by means of another, the carving-out of a living image of another language."<sup>(10)</sup>

Challenging the conservative side of language is a choice that can be made by the writer to de-familiarize mainstream language creating a possibility for unique, original minor utilization of the language of the superior. The major challenge for diasporic writers is to write in the dominant's language which is a subversive tool itself. They write with a new intensity that would give life to the language of expression. This makes language not a static object. Rather, minor literature becomes a means of collective expression, which highly favors a deterritorialization of expression.

A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. [...] The second characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political. [...] The third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value<sup>(11)</sup>.

The purpose of transnational literature is to disrupt monolingualism, which encourages in the process a more globalized world, and offers the possibility of trans-cultural communication and exchange. This assures a world capable to surmount differences, and therefore fosters pluralism, and opens up doors for dialogue and negotiation, while maintaining particularities.

Through a close reading of Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*, and Randa Abd El Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in this?*, it is possible to deduce the following questions concerning the Arab Muslims' experience in the diaspora: is it feasible that Arab Muslims living in the

West can doubly identify themselves as Western *and* Arab Muslims at the same time? Aren't these identities too contradictory to be unified under one name? Is there a possibility for such a blending of identities? Through the notion of "hybrid subjectivities,"<sup>(12)</sup> the authors show how they can offer the possibility of liberating the hybrid self- at least imaginatively- from the obstacles of imposed boundaries.

## 2- Defying Myths: Faith as a Haven:

Aboulela's *The Translator* is a novel that deals with issues of religious and cultural identity that highlight the interrelation between Islam, nostalgic memory, and cultural translation.

Aboulela shows how Sammar, her Muslim protagonist, finds refuge in Islam and tries to practice her religion in an un-tolerating society, particularly to the Muslim faith. In order to avoid the erasure of her past and to preserve her cultural and religious heritage, Sammar tries to protect her "home" from cultural and religious effacement by keeping the principles of Islam within her house. After her husband's death, Sammar finds refuge in her faith which is the only way and solace that gives her emotional strength to continue her life,

The only stability in life, unreliable life, taking turns the mind could not imagine. When she finished praying, she sat for the *tasbeeh*, [...] *Astaghfir Allah ... I seek forgiveness from Allah [...]*<sup>(13)</sup>.

As a typical Muslim woman, she feels safe, because faith works as the only stable and solid element that provides her with the strength to move on and preserves her life from the chaos that surrounds her.

Concerning *Does my Head Look Big in This*, Amal, the protagonist, like Sammar finds recourse and refuge in her Islamic religion. Although, she is aware of the obstacles that might stand in her way, she courageously chooses to wear the veil. With this brave act- particularly after the 9/11 events- Amal understands the outcomes that will result from her decision. For instance, a shopkeeper refuses to offer her a job claiming that "the thing on your head, love, that's what I mean. It's not hygienic and it just don't look good upat the front of the shop Sorry, love. Try somewhere else."<sup>(14)</sup>.

Amal at the beginning of the novel, lives an internal conflict about whether she wears the veil "full time" or not, and worries about her classmates' reaction- among them is Adam- the boy whom she had a crush on. She doubts whether she can face her friends at school or not, and afraid of standing upin front of them, she is afraid of what they might think of her once they see her wearing the hijab, especially since it is considered –by many in the West- as a marker of backwardness and oppression. Convinced that her veil will make her closer to God and to her faith, and that her connection to God is stronger than people's opinion about her, she ventures to wear it, and indeed her nightmare starts. One incident that happens to her, that makes her feel embarrassed, and sink through the floor out of extreme shame, is when the bus driver intently attacks her by looking her in the eye and turning upthe radio volume, where the speaker says that Muslims are violently trouble makers.

Amal faces racism, because her hijab is a visible marker of her Muslim identity. However, she responds by defending herself. This can be noticed when one of her classmates says to her, "You must feel awful knowing you come from such a violent culture."<sup>(15)</sup>.

Although she experiences discrimination, Amal firmly stays true and faithful to her Muslim identity by deciding to wear the veil. She struggles with her decision, It is true that at the beginning, she feels somehow nervous about her friends' reaction, the first time she puts it on, but with time, she re-discovers herself and feels that the veil frees her.

She is constantly asked to provide valuable explanation concerning her stance toward the debate that links "Islam and terrorism." She is treated as if she is a weird phenomenon to be studied and analyzed. She is always judged for any crime that corners her within the same category as extremist terrorists, and which makes her feel like a suspect. This idea of islamophobia suffocates her, and prevents her from living her life as a "normal" Australian. She is tired and even exhausted of the continuous finger pointing accusations. Is it too much to ask from a teenager who is trying to explore life, and to understand its meaning? Why

burden her with a heavy load that she is not able to carry? She is begging the world to stop promulgating any xenophobic ideas concerning her religion. Actually her name reflects this vision, Amal means hope, to hold on to life. Amal is that flower of hope that came to say to the Western world why that hatred, I don't mean to hurt you, I just want to live peacefully with you.

Amal, as an agent of change does not accept the binary division between "us" and "them" and shouts at a girl who disturbs her, "This is my country and if you ever forget it again I'm going to rip your head off!"<sup>(16)</sup>.

Both novels innovatively display a new perspective about identity, where both protagonists, Sammar and Amal, live within a "third space"<sup>(17)</sup> constructing their identities in-between Arab Islamic and Western discourses.

### 3- Crossing the Boundaries: The Creation of Hyphenated Identities:

Through constructing new transnational spaces, the Muslim characters of Aboulela and Abdel Fattah find their true identity and real essence.

Sammar, the protagonist of *The Translator*, experiences a feeling of duality and two-foldness in terms of identity and belonging. She neither belongs to this world nor to that, she lives between two worlds. To survive the emotional and geographical exile she lives through in the foreign land, she often resorts to her memory as a tool which gives her a virtual access to distant home and helps her sustain the alienation and survive the displacement and un-belonging she feels in Scotland. She tries to re-live her childhood memories which take her to her place of origin, the place to which she really belongs,

In better times she used to reinvent the beginning of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan, Africa's largest land, in the Sister's Maternity Hospital, delivered by a nun dressed in white<sup>(18)</sup>.

The physical and emotional exile placed on Sammar in Aberdeen affects her very negatively, especially after the loss of her husband. What has worsened her situation is her family's distance from her and the fact that she always sees herself as a different other. This is clearly noticed when Sammar tries to compensate the feeling of loss by contrasting the differences that exist between the European and African landscapes. She finds shelter -in several instances- in her visual memory. Experiencing a "psychic exile" invokes a sense of detachment in her which is contrasted by an idealized homeland memory. Re-living her childhood memories in exile takes her to her place of origin, the place to which she really belongs. Eiman Abbas succinctly sums up Sammar's exilic experience by stating that "she is deeply influenced by what Eva Hoffman calls "effect of exile" which prevent "the subject of access to the radically different surroundings"<sup>(19)</sup> through "draining the world not only of significance but of its colors, striations, nuances, its very existence."<sup>(20)</sup>

Sammar, as a displaced character, maintains a strong connection and an important allegiance with her former home to resist the erasure of her identity. She remains faithful to all the ties that link her with or remind her of her homeland, and as such, she highlights the geographical differences between home and host land. Sudan is her familiar place, a place to which she fully belongs, a place she longs to go back to since her childhood.

Sammar's hallucination and memory of place indicates a "spiritual memory" where the longing for the *isha* prayer shows a deep connection between religion and nostalgia. Through her epiphany, Sammar gives birth to what Jahan Ramazani calls "connective dissonance"<sup>(21)</sup> in which the "the *here* becomes inseparable from the *not here*."<sup>(22)</sup> Sammar "dives into the past," but her memory is not a passive crying and wailing over this past, it is not a question of lamenting it, rather it is a strategy of survival and continuation in the present to avoid the obliteration and effacement of her identity, where the past memories live with her and helper live in the present. Engaging in a constructive dialogue with her past memories, Sammar refashions both her present and future,

Outside, Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced

just for her. She saw the sky cloudless with many stars, imagined the night warm, warmer than indoors. She smelled dust and heard the barking of stray dogs among the street's rubble and pot-holes. A bicycle bell tinkled, frogs croaked, the muezzin coughed into the microphone and began the *azan* for the *Isha* prayer. But this was Scotland and the reality left her dulled, unsure of herself. This had happened before but not for so long, not so deeply. Sometimes, the shadows in a dark room would remind her of the power cuts at home or she would mistake the gurgle of the central heating pipes for a distant *azan*. But she had never stepped into a vision before, home had never come here before. It took time to take in the perfect neatness of the buildings and the gleaming road<sup>(23)</sup>.

This metamorphosis exists only in Sammar's mind, the vision of transforming Aberdeen into Khartoum. Through the hallucinations and the language of senses, where she uses the smells, sounds, and sight to refresh her memory of the warm life of Sudan, and to linguistically and metaphorically translate her Islamic world to the west.

The contrasting cultures of Scotland and Sudan perfectly reflect the character of Sammar who struggles against her contradictory desires and beliefs that "form the backdrop to this finely crafted, tender cross-cultural love story. The two cities are intimately connected through" Sammar's character "as she experiences the stark contrasts of culture, history and climate."<sup>(24)</sup>

In Scotland the cold weather makes Sammar feel sluggish, empty and dead inside, whereas the warmth of Sudan gives her life again. Remembering the colours and smells of her native country represents her only solace for endurance. Through the character of Sammar, Aboulela contrasts the European culture, language, and landscape with that of the African continent. Sammar realizes the huge difference between her country and the host land and sheds light on how they both diverge in terms of "the weather, the culture, modernity, the language, the silence of the *muezzin*"<sup>(25)</sup>.

However, sometimes, both worlds can be fused and mixed together, wherein certain moments Sammar feels that Aberdeen is a familiar place to her, no longer an alien may be due to the factor of time (because she stayed in Scotland for a long time) which naturalizes her double existence, or probably because she, herself, is a mixture and fusion of these two worlds, who can neither live without this nor without that. She is both worlds joined together to formulate a new identity and invent a unique formula made up of this hyphen between Arab and Anglophone spaces.

The conception that Sammar is only Arab is meaningless without adding that hyphen of the Anglophone, this is why she constantly, has to keep moving back and forth between Africa and Europe to ensure her survival. She is tied to both worlds at the same time. She is certainly faithful to her Islamic religion, Arabic culture and language, in addition to the new ingredient that changes her life and her sense of belonging entirely; the love of a Western man who represents her link with the West. She reconciles both worlds –East and West- because she is the result of this amalgam that makes her transcend the geographical boundaries, and any distance obstacle that might stand in her way. And as such, she originally creates a transnational identity that steps beyond any temporal or spatial barriers.

Similarly, a character like Amal can never identify exclusively as Arab, because this will lead her to isolation, and she cannot identify as entirely Western, because she will be rootless, rejecting her Muslim identity and Arab origins. The only way in front of her is to merge both cultures together, to create a "hybrid identification" generating a new and unprecedented multicultural identity, smoothly moving between the East and the West. She is "half in, half out."<sup>(26)</sup> She is neither fully Arab nor fully Australian. However, the path for Amal is not easy, without facing challenges, because "neither text comfortably allows Arab and Western identity to share space without conflict but nor do they advocate total assimilation. Years of multicultural discourse make outright rejection of diversity an unacceptable answer, even post 9/11."<sup>(27)</sup>

Amal's Muslim beliefs are certainly unnegotiable. Nevertheless, "she [intelligently] says she wants to pick and choose what [she] likes and what she doesn't like from culture,"<sup>(28)</sup> in order to securely and comfortably ensure her existence in a multicultural environment.

It is through the experiences of other migrants that Amal comes to understand her true identity as a hyphenated Australian,

It's been the "wogs", the "nappy heads", the "foreigners" the "persons of Middle Eastern appearance", the Asians, the "oppressed" women, the Greek Orthodox pensioner chain-smoker, the "salami eaters", the "ethnics", the pom-turned-curry munchers, the narrow-minded and the educated...It's their stories and confrontations and pains and joys which have empowered me to know myself, challenges me to embrace my identity as a young Australian-Palestinian-Muslim girl<sup>(29)</sup>.

Amal accepts that she lives in an intercultural world and identifies with other hyphenated Australians in which she is able to construct her Arab hybrid self. She achieves an interesting balance where she successfully integrates within the Australian society while preserving her cultural and religious beliefs. Hence, she shatters any myths that surround the construction of her identity provoked by the war on terror.

Amal's assimilation is not a blind one. She positively embraces an assimilationist identity in an adaptable and flexible way. As a hybrid living in Australia she creates a tolerating and fluid identity. The fact that she has two types of friends, Simone, the white Australian and Eleen, the Japanese Australian, from one side, and Leila, who belongs to the same culture and religion as her, from another side, shows how comfortably she can mix with others who do not share the same background as her. She states, "Luckily, crisscrossing my two sets of friends has never proven to be a disaster since everybody gets along."<sup>(30)</sup>

It is obvious that religious and cultural differences no longer represent a problem when the major group readily and willingly understands the minor one and accepts such existing differences. Since Amal is a second generation immigrant, who was born and grew up in Australia, and has no memories of her homeland-Palestine-, except for those stories that her father tells her, she easily integrates and creates a hybrid identity because as she can cope with people from other ethnic groups.

In the end, the ideologies of the protagonists of both the texts converge: they comprehend that they live in a world where they inevitably have to accommodate and incorporate difference "without entirely diluting it, and a world where a choice between 'us' and 'them' comes to seem natural, now unavoidable and difficult to negotiate. It's a hard [t]ask, being both alone and all together, but it's situated through both texts as the only way forward, negotiating this complex task of cultural border crossing in times when the world is increasingly culturally, racially, ethnically and religiously divided."<sup>(31)</sup>

#### **4- Hybridizing the Form: Identity, Language and Cultural Translation:**

The blending of the identities of the heroines in both texts is represented through mixing the English language with some Arabic words which lets the reader smell the Arabness persistent in their language. It is true that they write in English language, but they simultaneously weave their texts with the interplay of travelling between both languages to indicate the duality of their identities. Amal and Sammar relish the reader with an enjoyable sprinkle of their genuine identities, by flavoring their texts with words related to their Muslim faith such as "*wuduh*" which means ablution, or the act of cleansing the body as a religious rite. She also performs the "*fajr*" prayer which is one of the prayers of Islam practiced at dawn. Other words that add credibility to Amal's hybrid identity are "*Yallah!*" which means "hurry up" and "*Ya Amal*" which denotes "*Oh Amal.*" Sammar's use of words such as "*Inshaallah*" which signifies "*if Allah wills it,*" and "*Astaghfir Allah*" which stands for "*I seek forgiveness from Allah*" allude to her strong link with her religious identity.

Language plays a very important role in shortening the distance and bridging the gap between her motherland and the receiving country, where translation secures Sammar's daily connection with Islam in a strange world where she feels –emotionally, culturally, and



religiously- displaced and disconnected. Islam is always present with Sammar in the West, she carries information from one language to another, but she stays in touch with her cultural and religious roots, in the spiritual emptiness and darkness caused by emotional exile.

In *The Translator*, the notion of translation is used rhetorically and manipulatively, where “the dominated who translates its own culture for the dominating to comprehend it.”<sup>(32)</sup> She subverts power relations, where the text is poured through her eyes. It is not the Western dominator who controls the text, it is Sammar, the previously marginalized other, who speaks and in the process tries to rectify any misconceptions about the East. Through translation, she builds a new understanding and reworks the previous stereotypical perception of her culture and identity. She is empowered with translation to challenge the dichotomous relation between East and West.

It is Sammar who plays the role of the translator of the Quran, originally written in Arabic to Rae Isles, the Western scholar of Islam. Through Sammar’s eyes/translation, Rae gets a wider knowledge of the Islamic religion. As such, while she interprets the Muslim view of the Quranic text, she simultaneously introduces Rae to a different more authentic view of the “other.” In this way, she subverts the hegemonic west/east dichotomous relationship

Through the translation process, Sammar’s task involves first, interpreting, the Quran and then re-decoding or rewriting it in English. Therefore, whether intended or not, the translator would be manipulating or playing with the meaning of the translated text. Thus, as a translator, Sammar is not merely a transporter or carrier of meaning between the two languages, and it is impossible for her to deal with the text from a detached perspective.

Subverting the idea of “westernization,” and refusing to yield to the Western culture, it is possible to argue that Rae, “undertook a ‘reverse translation’, an ‘Easternization process’, since he *surrendered, using Spivak’s terminology*, to a third World culture, having Sammar as the mediator of this process of assimilation.”<sup>(33)</sup> Spivak describes translation as “one of the ways to get around the confines of one’s identity.”<sup>(34)</sup>

Language is similarly, an important marker inherent in the definition of Amal’s cultural identity. She enjoys the “pleasure of postcolonial parody,”<sup>(35)</sup> a strategy of subversion adopted as an exaggerated form of replication in order to challenge what Abdel Fattah calls “lazy generalizations” promulgated by “anti-Muslim stereotypes.”<sup>(36)</sup> These stereotypes are intentionally reproduced by the minor group in a hyperbolic or an overstated manner to overthrow the distorted reality that the stereotypes intend to transmit. It is the act of “undo[ing] by overdoing”<sup>(37)</sup> One example that shows Amal’s use of parodic language is her description of Hidayah, her previous Islamic school, “Hidayah –The Guidance- Islamic college. Where they indoctrinate students and teach them how to form Muslim ghettos, where they train with Al-Quaeda for school camp[...] Not.”<sup>(38)</sup> Parody, here, is employed as a literary technique by Amal who belongs to the minority group to resist the “simplistic representation” by stereotyping the “stereotypes, and undo[ing] the stereotype by overdoing it.”<sup>(39)</sup>

The use of a hybridized language remains a common feature in Anglo-Arab women’s writing. It is a vibrant phenomenon that forges a new identity construction and testifies to the creation and re-creation of identity amidst a multicultural universe.

### Conclusion:

Both writers show that cultural identity is not a statically predefined issue, rather it is a negotiable one that is formed through the existence of multiple experiences of living on the hyphen, and constructed via border crossing in multi- cultural and transnational contexts. They chose an Arab hybrid or hyphenated identity, where their survival is ensured through the combination and mixture of both Arab and Western cultures. They also defend their Arab culture and Muslim religion challenging any myths, stereotypes, or misconceptions that might surround the definition of their identities.

The heroines of both novels embrace their religion and employ it as a tool of reinventing themselves amidst the complex mixture of cultures. Islam is centrally perceived as a curing medium and a healing power through which Amal and Sammar heroines seek to reconcile

their lost, fragmented, and scarred selves. Both of them rely on their faith as a means that provides them with emotional and psychological security. Through religion, they can overcome the trauma of exile and display a mature acceptance of themselves in the West. Thus, they gain enough power, firmness, and stability to negotiate their identities in the diaspora. Their freedom is already attained as they have chosen Islam as the primary defining feature of their identity.

Both novels usher the possibility of reconciling cultural differences. As diasporic narratives, they focus on the encounter between East and West. Both heroines transcend difference by celebrating cultural diversity. Through their final transformations, the protagonists mark the end of the clash of civilizations, by accepting new alliances and understanding the necessity of living with the “other” in a multicultural world that brings uppromising results.

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