

**“Choked by a kind of brightness”:
Travelling Transculturally into
Leila Aboulela’s Narrative of Faith**

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To understand is not to project oneself into the text but to expose oneself to it; it is to receive a self enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds that interpretation unfolds (Ricoeur 2008, 293).

1. Aboulela’s transcultural narrative of faith

“Choked by a kind of brightness” is how the Scottish bridegroom, a convert to Islam, feels when he is finally taken to his Muslim bride in Leila Aboulela’s story *Something Old, Something New* (2018). The marriage ceremony led by the imam, a signing of the contract with her father and the ritual prayer, has just been performed. “Congratulations, we’ve given her to you. She’s all yours now” (47). She has been waiting for him among the women in another room and he has been prevented from seeing her until this very moment, when a door opens and he is breath-taken by the sheer brightness of her beauty, whose intensity almost stuns his senses. It is an experience of sensuous as much as spiritual revelation for which he can only address God: “he could only say, oh my God, I can’t believe it! [...] God, I can’t believe it!” (48). The aesthetic/erotic and religious experiential

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dimensions, the emotions of desire and faith are seen to coalesce in a way that appears to me a beautiful, persuasive example of what Aboulela means when she says that she wants her fiction to “reflect Islamic logic”:

I want to show the psychology, the state of mind and the emotions of a person who has faith. I am interested in going deep, not just looking at “Muslim” as a cultural or political identity but something close to the centre, something that transcends but doesn’t deny gender, nationality, class and race. I write fiction that reflects Islamic logic (Aboulela 2011).

She cohesively succeeds in doing this through her powerfully transcultural narrative of faith, and this is what the following discussion, substantiated by selected references to the above-mentioned short story, will be focussed on.

One of the most prominent African Arab writers in English today, critically acclaimed Leila Aboulela puts faith and Islam right at the centre of her writing. Daughter of a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother, she grew up in Khartoum where she attended westernized schools and graduated in Economics and Statistics; then, as a postgraduate, she attended the London School of Economics in London. In 1990 she migrated with her husband and child to Aberdeen, Scotland, where she is currently based though she has always been familiar with culturally negotiating across different ethnicities and languages – in Khartoum, Cairo, Jakarta, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, besides London and Aberdeen. In Lindsay Moore’s statement, she is “the most high-profile advocate of the Islamic revival in English-language literature” (Moore 2012, 75). As a matter of fact, over the last three decades, Arab anglophone writers have been involved in a cultural critical revision of Western translations of Arab alterity, spurred by the need to react against both traditional reductive stereotyping and, more urgently, by the intensified demonization and criminalization of Arabs in Western media coverage after the Islamist attacks of 9/11 in 2001 and, in the UK, in 2005 and 2017. She fully participates from a courageous, fore-front position in this revival fuelled, in

particular, by hyphenated Arab diasporic writers engaged in a “politics of retranslation, rewriting, relocation, and cultural repollination that are abundantly featured in the postcolonial era” (Wahab 2014, 220).

Prejudiced reduction, when not invisibility, of the Arab culture was what Said denounced again and for the last time, being he close to dying, in 2003, asking independent intellectuals to forge a new humanistic approach by relying on historical knowledge:

There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and external domination. [...] Critical thought does not submit to state power or to commands to join one or another approved enemy. Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other and live together. [...] Twenty-five years after *Orientalism* was published, questions remain about whether modern imperialism ever ended or whether it has continued in the Orient (Said 2004, 872, 873).

His legacy is a lucid, intense call to the arms provided by a new humanism:

My point [...] is to insist that the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like “America”, “The West”, or “Islam” and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be opposed [...] humanism is the only and I would go so far as saying the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history (878).

Aboulela, who has often mentioned Said, together with that other strenuous champion of postcolonial humanism, Fanon, as her main sources of inspiration, can surely be said to have answered this call to humanize Islam and the Islamic worldview against Western cultural ignorance and prejudice, as much as against Islamist Fundamentalism. The latter has appropriated the right to speak for an

Islam exploited for its own reactionary ideology, an ideology notoriously using women as its passive cultural emblems of the most traditional Arabo-Muslim patriarchal identity. It may be useful, at this point, to quote directly a statement of hers that effectively reflects both the climate denounced by Said and her will to resist through her creative writing:

The early 90's, when I first started writing, were the beginning of the forceful anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiments in the Western media and my presence in Britain made me defensive. I needed to express that life in Khartoum was good, that the people were good, that it was circumstances that had made us all leave rather than choice. I was in a culture and place which asserted every minute that "West is best", Africa is a mess, only Islam oppresses women and that as an Arab woman I should be grateful that I had escaped. Youth and pride made me resist this description. [...] it was fiction that came out [...] – those early stories [...] As my writing progressed and I adapted to life in Britain, the stories too began to reflect less of the culture shocked protagonist and more of the global citizen (Aboulela 2024).

She is in the good company of Muslim female writers on both sides of the Atlantic, with whom she persuasively shares the effort to articulate through their art an "alternative episteme derived from Islam but shaped specifically by immigrant perspectives" (Hassan 2008, 299) – for instance, of Egyptian-American Leila Ahmed and Syrian-American Mohjan Kalif on the one hand, and on the other, one more engaged with transculturalism and secular feminism, of Jordanian-British Fadia Faqir and Egyptian-British Adhaf Soueif.

Countering the simplistic, flat portrayal of Muslim women in Western writing, Aboulela's Muslimas are not helpless victims or escapees of Islam as they are fulfilled in their religion, and this is only the most evident among many other motifs in her narrative that pre-empt and deconstruct many Western readers' expectations, to which she does not pander in any way. Not for nothing Aboulela has been included among the intellectuals contributing to Muslim Arab Feminism who are

involved in questioning the gendered formation of Islamic epistemology and “do not question the sacrality of the Qur’an, only the temporality of its interpretations” (Cooke 2000, 150), the fact, that is, that they have been the exclusive prerogative of men. “Islamic”, in the seemingly oxymoronic phrase Islamic Feminists, should be taken as “describ[ing] the speech, action, writing, or way of life engaged with questioning Islamic epistemology as an *expansion* of their faith position and not as a *rejection* of it” (151).¹

Quite interestingly, then, Aboulela’s deep interest in traditional Sufism, the spiritual core of Islamic culture, as inferable from her fiction’s multiple references to its doctrine, its Orders, and its historical figures – the classical scholar Abu Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111) above all – may be seen as also due to what the theologian of Islam and feminist theory Sa’diyya Shaikh defines as Sufism’s “potential to enhance a rethinking of gender ethics” (Shaikh 2013, 267). The priority accorded by Sufism to the individual’s inner state and surrender to God, irrespective of this individual’s gender, together with its “inherent wariness [...] toward any person’s assertion of superiority over another” (277), “when combined with a feminist lens [has] much to offer in the way of developing a comprehensive framework for an egalitarian politics of gender” (268). As a matter of fact, Aboulela’s Muslimas are characterized by the deeply personal way in which they live their path towards God while, at the same time, quietly bypassing or deconstructing the patriarchal expectations of their own communities.

This quiet deconstruction, one should add, may be seen to operate at various levels, provocatively challenging that substantial part of Western society at large that, instead, would like to be confirmed in their prejudicial view of Muslim lives. In an interview released in 2005, Aboulela presents herself as

¹ Cooke’s underlinings. Other interesting British Islamic feminists whose texts are committed to their faith-based perspective are Yasmin Hai, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, and Naima Robert.

a creative writer [attempting] to answer the need for self-representations on the part of the younger generation of Muslims. Islam is the epistemological force in these people's lives and the West is their home and yet they do not see an adequate representation of themselves in contemporary fiction and daily television programs and radio (Eissa 2005, n.p.).

While avoiding the hegemony of the anti-colonial writing-back discourse, her fiction aims at playing a different 'game' with her readers, one that, being exquisitely transcultural, asks more from them, as well as from her critics. As a matter of fact, faith and Islamic religion in her fiction become vectors of transculture, offering them a transcultural experience that, bypassing the impermeable tolerance of multiculturalism and the indifference of globalization, forces, as it were, the boundaries of their monocultural world. In Welsch's words, "[transculture] compels us to 'readjust our inner compass': away from the concentration on the polarity of the own and the foreign to an attentiveness for what might be common and connective whenever we encounter things foreign", far, it is important to add, from any attempt at exotic assimilation. "Transculturality contains the potential to transcend our received and supposedly determining monocultural standpoints" (Welsch 2001, 78), which does not mean that, as emphasized by Epstein (2009, 342), it aims at abolishing our cultural origins and habits; on the contrary, it enriches their potentials for transformation. So, one crucial lesson taught by Aboulela's fiction is that one should not be afraid of transculture, unless one prefers, as provocatively put by Epstein, "just to remain with [his/her] inborn identity, to confirm it again and again" (339).

Her novels (*The Translator* and *Minaret* in particular) and her short story collections² present us with a double challenge: for proposing religious faith as such as

² To date, Leila Aboulela has published six novels and two collections of short stories, translated in fifteen languages: *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), *Lyrics Alley* (2010), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), *Birds Summons* (2019), *River Spirit* (2023),

a main theme for fiction to a largely secularized Western audience and, more to the point, for asking them to try to vicariously experience the “Islamic logic”, as she puts it.

The first challenge can be met by those readers, be they believers in a faith or not, who are willing to acknowledge and consider the role played by the spiritual dimension in everyone’s existence, unless one decides that secularism by definition should rule it out. Admittedly, though, it is quite a daring thematic choice, which Aboulela is perfectly aware of (“To be a practising person of any faith nowadays is to swim against the tide”, Aboulela 2015, 330). Western criticism appears somewhat unprepared and, more to the point, Western postcolonial criticism, with notable exceptions of course,³ cannot properly be said to have developed adequate conceptual tools to tackle religion and the sacred in literature. Yet, as keenly put by Bhabha, “[t]he sacred is in no sense alien to the secular; the secular and the sacred are ‘foreign’ to each other, while coexisting in a translational condition of growing kinship” (2021, xii). As pointed out later, Aboulela’s fiction, by showing how the world of her Muslim characters ‘transcends’, as it were, the oversimplified division between Islam and secularity in the continuum of their everyday lives, calls for a rethinking of the fixed opposition between religion and secular which has dominated and marred analyses of Islam and Muslim societies.⁴

and *Coloured Lights* (2001), *Elsewhere, Home* (2018). She has also authored many radio-plays.

³ Such as *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* (2009) by Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devin-Glass and Lyn McCredden.

⁴ Useful reflections on the topic can be found in Sherine Hafez’s *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women’s Islamic Movements* (2011). Though focused on women’s Islamic activism in Egypt, Hafez’s research, solidly grounded on a critical examination of Western social, anthropological and ethnographic tenets, succeeds in speaking to the general reader and to the current political climate as it seeks to challenge sweeping generalizations about religion versus secularism, or science versus

Then, to come to the second challenge, although it must be acknowledged that critical concern is growing about the tendency “to marginalize and demonize expressions of faith, especially the faith of others” (Dimitriu 2014, 79), and that a post-secular attitude more aware of multiple ways of being secular is gaining ground, Nash’s lucid statement according to which “Islam as a religion is the unwelcome guest at the feast of Western secularism” (Nash 2012, 15) still holds true. However, it must be emphasized that Islam, in Aboulela’s texts, is not hypostatistically and a-historically given, nor is it politically or ideologically assumed. On the contrary, it is approached phenomenologically, staged in the everyday lives of her Muslim characters, especially her female protagonists and especially in British contexts poisoned by Islamophobia. Extending to her whole production what Ghazoul says about *The Translator*, in going through it we learn about “how enmeshed Islam is in the life of Muslims and the kind of spiritual solace it gives”, especially to the uprooted and the exiles. “By pointing out how Islamic faith permeates daily life [...] Aboulela makes Islam familiar [...] more comprehensible as a mode of being and thus more humane” (Ghazoul 2014, 200, 201-202).

In its effort to translate for us the “state of mind and the emotions of Muslim believers”, practicing or not, and their transnational feeling of religious belonging or, in Dimitriu’s coinage (2014, 71), their “home-in faith”, by avoiding domesticating their foreignness to us, Aboulela’s narrative acts as a powerful, if uncomfortable at times, transcultural aesthetic experience. And, as with any translation of a foreign text, a degree of disturbance for the target reader cannot but testify to the goodness of the translation, to the respect of the ethics of difference.⁵

rationality, generalizations that become reified categories easily adopted in any field of culture, including literary criticism.

⁵ A. Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* (1992, 5, 4: “Bad translation [...] carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work [...] Good translation [...] forces the domestic language and culture to register the foreignness of the foreign text.”).

Write in a western language, publish in the west, and you are constantly translating back and forth – this is like this here but not there. A thing has high value here, a certain weight, move it to another place and it becomes nothing (Aboulela 2002, 201-202).

Through a continuous translational experience, Aboulela's stories invite us to travel into the transformative power of faith in her protagonists' lives. If successful, this travel should enact a transcultural transformation for her reader, too, meant as an "enlargement of [his/her] self", to retrieve Ricoeur's epigraph, an expansion of cultural horizons, an understanding of a different world which does not necessarily imply a sharing of it.

It is by now a firm point of the criticism devoted to the Sudanese-British writer that translation is a philosophical, thematic, and rhetorical pivot of her whole narrative. In particular, Hassan's acute observations are in order here, even though they are referred in particular to *The Translator*, whose protagonist is a Sudanese Muslima working as a translator into English of Arab texts for an anti-Orientalist Scottish academic, Rae. Elaborating on the Benjamin-oriented theory of translation put forth by Berman and Venuti,⁶ he calls "translational texts" those texts that "lay special emphasis on translation as an essential component of cross-cultural contact" (Hassan 2006, 754), thus undercutting the multicultural myth of autonomous and pure cultures. More specifically, "translational texts emphasize the complexity of cultural and linguistic negotiations and their ideological investments, show the limits of translation, construct new models of identity based on cultural exchange and mutual transformation" (Hassan 2008, 304). As a matter of fact, Aboulela's novels and short stories succeed in widening our epistemic paradigms and in extending our transcultural awareness, including the awareness of the complexity and, at times, the ineradicable opacity of foreignness so

⁶ Besides Berman 1992, cf. L. Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation. Towards an Ethics of Difference*, in particular the paragraph "The Ethics of Translation" (1998, 81-87).

that, in the end, her kind of translation perfectly exemplifies Hassan's typology of translational text, which "does not leave us with a comfortable sense of self-identity, let alone superiority" (Hassan 2006, 754).

This should apply to her critics, too, excluding those critics who, speaking from a secularist, supposedly progressive, position, are not prepared for this 'transforming' experience. It is the case, for example, of Sadia Abbas (2011), who charges Aboulela with writing Islamic apologetics, novels monologically subordinated to religion, rather than considering that Aboulela writes about religiosity, about people who have or do not have faith, not about religion in itself. In quite a bizarre critical move, she also measures *The Translator* with the generic paradigm of an English eighteenth-century novel, Richardson's *Pamela*, by virtue of their supposed sharing in common motifs like female virtue and the marriage plot, only to find the first disappointing due to its conservative Islamism. From a similar position Nadia Butt (2009) advances the thesis according to which Aboulela excludes any possible translation or bridge between Islam and modern Europe by using, again, *The Translator* as her testing ground, in which the transcultural approach and, finally, conversion to Islam of Scottish Rae should be enough to prove exactly the opposite.

Of course, what remains absolutely untranslatable in her works is exactly her protagonists' experience of faith, the sheer fact of their believing in God, that being a miracle, a translation-cum-conversion that only a divine Translator can offer. As Sammar, the protagonist of *The Translator*, says about the Koran, "the meanings can be translated but not reproduced. And of course the miracle of it can't be reproduced" (Aboulela 2008, 121). That is out of Aboulela's poetics. She does not mean to convert her readers; she aims at having them experience a travel into Islamic alterity. There is nothing exotic in this, and much that disturbs while enveloping us in the excitement of a new understanding, in the enjoyment of a different beauty.

To enter Aboulela's world and appreciate her art the Western reader has, in a way, to surrender to a sort of initiation rite, a sort of temporary cultural conversion

for the entire duration of the textual, par-excellence transcultural, voyage. The writer has always been aware of the difficulties involved in her determination to write a narrative of faith from an existential, not political nor doctrinal perspective:

[t]o me faith is more than that, and if modern-day secular discourse does not have the language to explain it, then I have to make up this language or chart this new space. This is the biggest motivation I have to write (Aboulela 2007).

She has, indeed, opened a new space in anglophone Arab writing, successfully meeting with a third challenge, that of making art out of the logic of faith, by employing a nuanced and finely cut prose largely celebrated for its beauty and a narrative rhetoric unfailingly attuned to the diversity and complexity of her characters' postcolonial and postmigratory modes of being and belonging.

2. Transculturality and faith in *Something Old, Something New*

Something Old, Something New (2003) is a short story that in its brevity nonetheless can provide us with effective textual examples of Aboulela's transcultural approach to Islamic religion. Incidentally, while her novels have received substantial attention, the same cannot be said of her remarkable short stories, so I hope that what follows may be a useful contribution in that direction, though it is not meant as an extensive close reading of the whole text but, rather, as a selective reading of those elements in it especially relevant to its transculturality.

Something Old, Something New is part of the collection *Elsewhere, Home*, whose thirteen stories were originally published between 1999 and 2017. Set in Africa (Khartoum, Cairo) and in the UK (London, Aberdeen, and elsewhere), they offer the possibility of approaching a new phase of Arab migration writing, one more focussed on postmigrant and transcultural ways of being Muslim in secular, often secularist, and often Islamophobic Britain. "Postmigrant" is to be meant in the way Roger Bromley intends it, that is, as characterizing those postcolonial

contemporary “narratives that are post-national/ist, post-ethnic and postmigrant”, “stories of complex subjectivities which unsettle, render unstable, ideas of otherness”, stories that, while being linked with diaspora, nevertheless look at “a present and future trajectory rather than anchorage in an ‘originary’ culture” (Bromley 2017, 38, 37).

The postmigrant condition of her characters, so, is antagonistic towards ideological configurations of identity based on ethnicity, nationalism, or coloniality, and this is perfectly in keeping with the transnational vocation of the Islamic *umma*, faith figuring as the unique, real home for its believers all over the world. The spaces of plurality outlined by Bromley are here played out mainly “through [the collection’s] representations and negotiations of gender, family practices, and generation as well as religious belief and practice” (Englund 2020, 2). Faith, as it were, envelops all these motifs, that are certainly not “denied” but “transcended” (to use Aboulela’s previous quote).

Something Old, Something New is no exception. We might define it as a trans-cultural love story subsumed under the unnamed protagonists’ love for Allah. The young Scot is already a convert to Islam when he meets his future Sudanese wife for the first time in Edinburgh at the “Nile Café”, the Sudanese restaurant near the mosque,⁷ where she works as a waiter, and where he returns again and again, after the Friday prayer, driven by his attraction for her rather than by the Café’s “weird tastes”, as he is “by nature cautious, wanting new things but held back by a vague mistrust” (25). We will see how, by the end of the story, the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ in him will have interpenetrated.

During a trip to Arthur’s Seat, the two protagonists talk to each other freely. They are made to appear to us as free agents facing generational and parental/social conflicts. She tells him calmly that she is a divorcee, having been married for six

⁷ Translated in Edinburgh, the mosque – a constant, material and symbolic presence in all stories and novels by Aboulela – has no outside Eastern beauty to offer; nonetheless it maintains its vital function for the Muslim community.

months to a Sudanese who was actually in love with an English girl but who had married her to satisfy his own parents' expectations: "They thought a Sudanese girl like her would make him forget the girlfriend he had been living with. They were wrong". She is keen to stress that her husband had married "not against her will [...] but against his will" and though she had "wanted to love him", his parents did put the blame for the marriage failure on her, for not being "clever enough", for not "trying hard enough" (28). Now she does not want to go back to Sudan, she is determined to go on living in Edinburgh, a Muslima with a single life of her own. Then they "spoke about their faith. He told her how he had become a Muslim", how he had found a mentor in a Scottish teacher of his and chosen Islam after a dramatic existential crisis full of "taboo questions" ("what is all for, what does it all mean, what's the point of going on") for which he could find no answers. We come to know about his Catholic parents' bafflement: "they did not understand that side of him that was theoretical, intangible, belonging to the spiritual world", and fear: "it was easier for [them] to accept that he was in love with a Muslim girl than it was to accept that he was in love with Islam" (29-30). Indeed, erotic love and religious love/faith, sensuality and spirituality are seen to intersect and define each other in the story. The couple's desire transpires from the very first page and gets even intensified by the physical distance required from them by the Islamic customs until they become husband and wife.

The story opens with the arrival of the Scottish bridegroom at Khartoum airport: "he was driven by feelings, that was why he was here, that was why he had crossed boundaries and seas" (11). The story will stage a proper transcultural crossing: an opening to the Sudanese reality (including the civil war in the South evidenced by "the army trucks carrying young soldiers in green uniforms", 41), and culture coinciding with an expansion, not a cancellation, of his European background. More importantly, it will be a transcultural Sufi crossing and expansion of his ego's boundaries, which is how Sufism, the core of Muslim mysticism, conceives of the "travel" of faith: "One of the Sufis said, 'Travel away from home

and the difficulties will be a medicine for your ego's badness, you will return softer and wiser" (Aboulela 2002, 201).

As already pointed out, Aboulela's fiction reveals her deep knowledge of *Taşawwuf* or Sufism and of the Sufi methods for knowing and cultivating the self and its relationships with the community in order for the submission or self-surrender to God to be enacted. In particular, as highlighted by Billy Gray, it often stages a "Sufi dialectics" when "her protagonists embark upon spiritual journeys characterized by experiences strikingly similar to those embedded in traditional Sufi practices" (Gray 2021, 147). In *Something Old, Something New* one can recognize the motif of travel as a spiritual journey and that of the Jihad meant as the individual internal struggle to overcome one's *nafs al-ammāra*, one's inclinations toward ego-based and unrefined or even base instincts, and confirm one's strength of faith. In the same way other recognizable important Sufi motifs surfacing in the text are the necessity of a teacher/spiritual guide, the value of submission, the crucial role of praying, as well as the importance of the daily practices and rites of Islam to be engaged in support of a deep, internal awakening and enlightenment. So, while it is true that our Scottish convert is travelling from Scotland to Africa driven by his love for the Sudanese divorcee, he also embodies the Sufi traveller embarked on a journey of cultural and spiritual submission not to be seen as, in the secularist view, subjection or subjugation. He is bound to meet with trials, but also with discoveries and spiritual pleasures, that will enact a profound transformation of his ego, so that he will actually return to Scotland "softer and wiser", that is, transculturally aware and enlightened in faith.

In Edinburgh, his teacher of chemistry had already been a spiritual guide to him, as we have seen. Now, in Khartoum, it is his future bride's turn to play that role. She will turn out to be sensitive to and aware of her fiancé's difficulties with cultural translation, reassuring him with her smiles and joyous expectations, while guiding him through the customs of the place and her extended family's expectations. In Sufi terms, she transmits to him that impalpable force passed from master to pupil called *Baraka* (Gray 2021, 8).

“I mustn’t kiss you. No, she laughed, you mustn’t” (21). The first and, perhaps, the hardest trial for him is the physical separation from her that he has to maintain, as from the first moment they meet at the airport, where she appears accompanied by her brother, until they are ritually acknowledged as husband and wife, he shall never be able to see her alone. While sitting in the rear seat of her brother’s car,

He wanted her to be next to him. And it suddenly seemed to him, in a peevish sort of way, unfair that they should be separated like that. She turned her head back and looked at him, smiled as if she knew. He wanted to say, you have no idea how much I ache for you, you have no idea. But he could not say that, not least because the brother understood English (22).

This effort at cultural translation obeying the Islamic logic will take place again when he has to comply with the marriage customs, the gifts and dowry to bring to her family (nothing too expensive, anyway, and for which he has received precise directions from his Muslima) and, above all, the marriage ceremony itself that, in a way, disappoints him for being, properly, the signing of a contract with her father in an all-male ceremony accompanied by prayer. A patriarchal exchange, as it is perceived from his European perspective, that embarrasses him, making him feel as if he had bought her.

In preparing himself for the ceremony he is also taken by a melancholic feeling of loneliness for not having his parents with him on this occasion, and he goes with his mind to his brother’s marriage feast, so different. Having passed the stage of the new convert’s “pride” feeling no qualms in rejecting his past customs, he is now “more ready to admit to himself what he misse[s]” (44). This is because, unlike his Sudanese-British Muslima, he still has to reach the really transcultural expansion, rather than rejection, of his old self.

Another important translational trial is represented by the mourning customs he makes experience of when her family is struck by the sudden death of her uncle, which implies that their wedding is to be postponed, apparently, for an indefinite

time. This absolute prioritizing of the community rites over the needs of its single members, together with the rule of gender separation in the carrying out of the mourning practices compels him to share a tent outside with the males of the enlarged family for three days, with no possibility of speaking to her or even seeing her. He feels disoriented and also annoyed, yet, to his own surprise, he gradually discovers that he is able not only to tolerate but even to appreciate and enjoy the comforting climate of bonding created by the new situation, the praying together most of all, no matter if the majority of them do not speak his language. Their religious brotherhood is able to overcome that, and then, there is always someone who worries about giving him rudimentary summaries in English of what is being said.

In the same way, though at the beginning he feels hostage of her numerous family, willy-nilly involved with them at all meal times, he soon appreciates their generous inclusiveness and the feeling of sharing that contrast so much with his own experience of northern atomized families. As much as he appreciates her father's attempt at communicating with him in a broken English which tastes with colonial heritage or, in the same, funnier, vein, her uncle's singing exhibition of "Cricket, lovely cricket at Lords", a calypso made famous by Trinidadian Lord Beginner which celebrates the 1950 victory of the West Indian cricket team over England and which is here apparently meant as a homage of colonial solidarity to a Scotsman.

Our traveller experiences the crucial value given in Islam to hospitality, especially towards the unknown traveller, no matter how poor the givers may be, and heedless of any reward, in keeping with the teachings of the Koran.⁸ Hers is certainly

⁸ Cf. Mehrez Hamdi, *La religion est-elle un obstacle au dialogue interculturel ?* 2010, p. 89: "Le voyageur aussi, celui qui n'est que de passage, qui est en terre étrangère, loin de siens, il est foncièrement moral de le recevoir, de lui donner à manger et à boire et de lui offrir asile le temps qu'il reprenne ses forces et poursuive son chemin. [...] La noblesse de l'action vient du fait qu'en l'accomplissant, nous sauvons des vies. Mais ne vient-elle pas aussi du fait que ce voyageur est inconnu, et que demain on ne le verra plus ? Il ne peut pas y avoir d'action plus désintéressée, plus belle. 'Nous vous

not an affluent family and contrastive comparisons with the comfortable life he has grown up in strike him immediately. For example, only now, after seeing her house, “shabbier” than he had imagined, and “full of people” (32),

he realized for the very first time, the things she’d never had: a desk of her own, a room of her own, her own cupboard, her own dressing table, her own mug, her own packet of biscuits. She had always lived as part of a group, part of her family. What was that like? He didn’t know. He didn’t know her well enough. He had yet to see her hair (33).

That the transcultural dynamic in their relationship presents them with difficulties and margins of misunderstanding and untranslatability is suggested at various points in the text. Yet, interestingly, these are accompanied by a feeling of shame, shame at not being up to the experience, shame at seeing themselves under the otherizing look of the other, not exactly under a self-satisfying light. This gives the measure of how strongly both are involved in the effort of opening and overcoming boundaries. For example, this happens when he gets robbed of his passport and his valuables while walking on a crowded and dusty street in the company of his fiancée and her brother. The eruption of fury he becomes prey of (he kicks the car tyres, shouting “f-this and f-that”) is clearly out of all proportions and terribly embarrassing to her. Still, this episode makes him aware and ashamed of how full of prejudiced “latent fears” (35) and mistrust towards ‘these’ people he is, as the robbery is lived by him as a full, inevitable confirmation of them.

Another instance of the limits of their reciprocal translations takes place at the British Embassy, where they go to renew their documents after the robbery and where she feels humiliated when she clearly perceives that she is being suspected of having stolen his passport in her presumed desperation to leave Sudan

nourrisson (disaient-ils) pour l’amour d’Allah, ne désirant de vous ni récompense ni gratitude’ (Coran L XXVI, 9)”.

and escape to the UK. He is not able to understand her predicament and appears completely insensitive to her shame, thus disappointing her bitterly:

They interrogated her and her brother, broad, flat questions but still she felt sullied and small. / Coming out of the Embassy, she was anything but calm. / What did they think, what were they trying to insinuate – that I stole your passport, as if I am desperate to go back there? / What's that supposed to mean? / It's supposed to mean what it means. You think you're doing me a big favour by marrying me? / No, I don't think that, of course not... / They do. they do, the way they were talking. Sneering at me and you didn't even notice! (36).

Still, at this and other difficult times, he is not going to give up or “drop out”; rather, he is going to disprove all those that, in Edinburgh, had “put him in a box” as “a giver-upper” (27) when he had fallen prey of the existential crisis that would lead him to approach Islam.

His cultural and spiritual journey towards a “softer, wiser” ego, to retrieve Aboulela’s Sufi quote, receives a strong boost from his experiencing himself as the Other of the place, though not in hostile terms. Looking out of the window of her brother’s beat-up car, “he became aware that everyone looked like her, shared her colour, the women were dressed like her and they walked with the same slowness which had seemed to him exotic when he had seen her walking in Edinburgh” (63). Here there is a reversal in otherization: here, in Sudan, it is his turn to embody the exotic Other and to attract the prying eyes of the people. However disorienting these episodes may be, they are transformative, they make him proceed along an inner journey that is making his cultural sensitiveness wider, as demonstrated by the patient attitude he adopts when he understands that her brother has been exploiting the couple’s predicament, trying to get some extra money for himself from him, in a definitely un-hospitable, un-Islamic way. But Aboulela’s Muslim characters are never meant to embody role models, as her readers know very well.

The sheer beauty of the African sky at night, the deep blue colour of the Nile, the touching bareness of her country (“a sensuous place, life stripped to the bare bones” 41), which was “disturbing” to him at first, together with the intense immersion into the rich tastes of the food offered to him, and the perfumes of Khartoum, but, above all, the touching hospitality and authenticity of its people’s Islamic life, all this, in the end, has made his journey emotionally vibrant and deep. By the time we reach the final section of the story, after the imam’s words quoted at the opening of the present essay – “Congratulations, we’ve given her to you now. She’s all yours now” (47) –, when “the door open[s] for him” (48) to reveal his spouse’s “glow” and “secret glamour” and he feels unable to say a single word, “choked by a kind of brightness”, the Sufi echoes are unmistakable: “doors’ openings”, “glimmers”, “flashes” are recurrent when describing the Sufi disciple’s experience of being finally able to pierce the opacity of the world, “when the heart is cleansed and illuminated by the divine light” (Shaikh 2013, 279). Allah has kept them apart, but now, as his wife, her long unveiled hair, her luminous beauty, “her dress in soft red, sleeveless” (48) intoxicate him as a revelation. It is a definitely sensual experience, promising erotic delights, but it is, at the same time, an experience of spiritual illumination, as if this bride were the embodiment of the powerful beauty of the world wanted by the “One”.⁹

This ecstatic moment lends itself to being glossed with the words employed by Aboulela to describe how the cultural shocks encountered in travelling/migration are like the medicine the Sufis say makes people less proud, culturally and spiritually: “in the clarity of shock, the hidden pattern in seemingly random events is revealed. Everything interlocks, makes sense. I travel from home and blows to my pride knock some sense into me, some sense” (Aboulela 2002, 202). The ‘pattern’ of his journey, its real ‘sense’ is no more hidden to him, though it has not

⁹ The Sufi term “One” refers to God’s Absolute Being, comprehending the metaphysical and the phenomenological planes of reality, of which man is a microcosmic reflection.

been an exotic, easy journey. She knows, she understands: “it’s been rough for me, these past days. Please, be sorry for me. / I do, she whispered, I do”.

The creative transcultural transformation infused, like spiritual energy, by their common faith has been working both ways. And now that they are going back to their life in Europe, she will not need to cover the ritual wedding henna decorating her hands: “I’ll wear gloves, she said, when we go back to Scotland, I’ll wear gloves, so as not to shock everyone. /No, you needn’t do that, he said, it’s lovely” (49). We are allowed to think that she will not need to stop wearing the veil, either, which used to make their outings “not as carefree as he imagined it” (27). That will continue to be a token of her postmigratory and transcultural mode of living, since the freedom and autonomy she enjoys in being able to choose whether to wear it or not (and around her examples of unveiled Muslim women are certainly not lacking) is translated by her into an enhancement of her loving submission to God, a fulfilling sign of free religious commitment in a largely secularized and largely anti-Islamic society.

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