

## HYBRID SPACES OF IDENTITY NEGOTIATION IN ABOULELA'S *THE TRANSLATOR* AND *MINARET*

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**Summary.** The current study explores Leila Aboulela's depiction of identity crisis in hybrid spaces of acculturation in her novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*. Accordingly, attention is brought to aspects of alienation, displacement and the dynamics of exile as a realm of cross-cultural and hybrid exchange. Henceforth, focal to this analysis is Homi Bhabha's elucidation of the concept of hybridity as a process of cultural mingling. In addition, it relies on postcolonial critics conception of identity. The journeys of Sammar and Najwa unveiled the fluidity of immigrants identity and the power of hybridity in reforming one's self-image. Crisis, in particular, is rather prefigured as a moment of in-between the protagonists' previous state of cultural stability and a newly generative and adaptive version. It rather raptures the stagnation of cultural purity and fuels plurality.

**Key words:** alienation, diaspora, displacement, hybridity, in-betweenness

### Introduction

Leila Aboulela, of *The Kindness of Enemies* fame, is prefigured as a promoter of the avant-garde of contemporary Anglo-Arab literature that has gained as much appeal and recognition inside of the UK as outside of it. Her writing dives deeply into the diverse tapestry of postcolonial, diasporic, and Muslim women's experiences in Western exile. Being born, raised, and lived in a hybrid household, Aboulela seeks to soften the ordeals of exile, as she declares in her interview with Keija Parssinen "I am looking for a place of compassion, a place in which the traveler can share the baggage they carried with them, a place to hum the yearning for home" [3]. Focal to Aboulela's narratives is the exilic women's confusion on the roads of in-betweenness. Hence, her stories as groundwork to initiate cultural identity re-negotiation, lay the way to an endlessly suggestive and liberating horizon. Aboulela's novels through employing manifold and unprecedented narrative voices and perspectives, ranging from widows and female teenagers to historical heroes, encapsulate the intricacy of the patriarchal and the East-West tensions.

Aboulela has pinpointed discourses of a forsaken and marginalized periphery in either country, the homeland, and the exile. She aspires to humanize the other. She has voiced the underrepresented and vulnerable stories of the female diaspora, torn between cultural loyalties to a departed motherland and the freedom endowed by a host country. Redolent with juxtaposing images of the exotic East and embellished West, Aboulela's writing unearths the struggles of identity construction in a fluid, unsettled environment that usually merges a fragmented present with a deeply rooted and intricate past. Such disturbed narratives usually reflect the psychological turmoil of their agents in a journey of transition.

Emblematic of Leila Aboulela's rich realm of cultural clash representation and female identity confusion, is her widely acclaimed novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*. Both narrate stories of uprooted protagonists, bringing about their past, cultural heritage and nostalgic memories. The narratives proceed back and forth in a temporal and spatial fluctuation. The novels unfold contradicting stories of a protagonists haunted by their past. Whilst the past takes a form of memories in Sammar's life, it is embodied by Anwar in Najwa's case. The former, Sammar, with a foot in the UK, struggles to put the other in the homeland; the latter, Najwa, unable to transcend her traumatic fleeing from Sudan leaves the motherland in attempts to seep into the exile.

*The Translator* revolves around Sammar, who is an immigrant widow living in Aberdeen, Scotland. Sammar, who lost her Sudanese husband in a car accident, is overwhelmed with memories and nostalgia for her homeland. Sammar lives with the anxiety of being not accepted by her in-laws in Sudan and the depression of cultural alienation in Aberdeen. However, her work as a translator brings about a crossroad between her and Rae, a university professor specializing in Middle East studies. His emphatic tolerance leads Sammar to reconsider and rethink her sense of belonging. Sammar takes refuge and faith in love to reinforce a sense of homeliness.

Conversely, *Minaret* opens with Najwa's stories about her family and friends in Sudan, as children of high-ranked statesmen. The next pages, however, bring about political unrest that accumulated in the execution of her father and their fleeing to the UK. In London, her brother becomes a drug addict and then he is sentenced to fifteen years in prison whilst her mother dies after fighting an irremediable disease. Najwa, uprooted and lonely, reconnects with her ex-boyfriend, who further troubles her life and exploits her money. On the edge of the abyss, her major life rerouting unfolds.

Whilst Sammar was induced to follow the society's tradition and norms, Najwa was urged by the men surrounding her to distance herself from religion and rather display liberal thinking as a manifestation of progression and socially high rank. Moving from Sudan to London, the novels are loaded with motifs of displacement and spatial disturbance. Sammar and Najwa are portrayed as spatially trapped characters. Akin to postcolonial writing, which usually centres around stories of previously-colonized people's dislocation and relocation, herein, displacement is prefigured as a space of identity re-negotiation. Displacement which is beyond a simplistic experience of spatial dwelling, rather extends to embody a 'multi-dimensional' occurrence [4, p.89] that deviates from the subject's sense of identity and ideology. The displaced individual lives in a perpetual sense that Heidegger terms as *unheimlich*, which could be translated as 'unhousedness' or more accurately 'not-at-homeness' [4, p.86], that is a sense of unrepairable loss engulfing their perception of the present.

Under the discussion of postcolonial and diasporic writing, as such *The Translator*, terms such as diaspora, borders, and politics of location become collateral and instantly

indicative of each other. They serve as a conceptual framework for a historized surveys and studies that aim to examine modern migration flows of people and the intersection of their cultures [6, p.16]. Diaspora brings about definitive questions and perspectives of home, nevertheless how, when, and in what form and under which situations such repetitive questions rise into the fore, or how the subjects, the host and native country address them, disclose insights about the social, ideological and historical peculiarities of a certain diaspora. The very willingness of the subjects for (not) returning to the country of ‘origin’ is decisive and emblematic of their ideological orientations and investments [6, p.189].

Nevertheless, concomitant of diaspora studies is the surfacing of hybridity issues and identity crisis struggles. Identity, as indicated in the *Oxford Dictionaries*, is derived from the Latin ‘identitas’ and ‘idem’ which could be translated into English as ‘sameness’ [14]. In the Cambridge Dictionary the term is defined as the feeling of being similar and, likewise, of being different from others [7]. Accordingly, the conception of identity is doomed as an ephemeral and unstable balance between ‘difference and sameness’. In particular, as Modarres Ali states “immigrants are nomads of the identity landscape, occupying the fringe until there is nothing left but the fringe” [13, p.3]. Henceforth this study approaches Sammar’s and Najwa’s identity confusion and their contradicting and simultaneous sense of difference from and sameness with people in the exile and homeland alike.

It is argued that through her novels *The Translator* and *Minaret*, Leila Aboulela denounces discourses of cultural purity. She advocates the importance of hybridity and malleability in the immigrants’ construction of a balanced and solid identity. In the confines of exile, immigrants are induced to transcend the stagnation of cultural rigidity. At the same time, both protagonists, Sammar and Najwa, accentuate the necessity of one’s re-rooting to his/her ideological heritage, so as not to be drowned by Western social and cultural impositions.

### **Hybridity and In-betweenness**

The characters’ construction of identity is based on the premises of both conceptions of hybridity and liminality. Each in her unique way, Sammar and Najwa try to pass the bridge of in-between the UK and Sudan back and forth appropriating and shedding cultural mores from either and subduing to neither. Hybridity, which has been transcended beyond the limiting notions of racial mingling and purity, lays a binder of clear relevance between the last centuries racial classifications and nowadays discourses of cross-culturalism [17, p.250]. As Leela Ghandi adds in her book, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, the concept of ‘in-between-ness’ as bound by the problematic of ‘hybridity’ is streamlined and funneled by the overarching concept of ‘diaspora’ and its properties [9, p.131]. Leela Ghandi further describes the encounters with the Other as sites of the ‘third-space’ of cultural exchange, reciprocity, and translation.

Herein, boundaries deterritorialize, dissolve, and merge to birth a reterritorialization, a ‘place of hybridity’ and indefinite zone that celebrates cultural plurality and impurity [9, p. 131]. Likewise, Sammar and Najwa dwindle in between dual modes of existence. Their stay in exile renders the UK as a third-space of acculturation. They are portrayed as neither solely belonging to the UK nor to Sudan. The more they stay in exile, the more they become attentive to the existence of differences between them and their surrounding.

*The Translator* implements a version of hybridity that is explained by Bhabha in his book, *The Location of Culture*. Accordingly, the East-West encounters are not simply with a unilateral impact, where one is utterly and exclusively dominating the other. Such confrontations transcend the discourses of purity and the idea of single polarity dominance and rather reshape both sides in an ambivalent relationship. They indicate “a period of complex and varied cultural contact and interaction” [11, p.1]. In other words, the imperial/colonial West implicitly absorbs and appropriates the cultural properties of its counterpart East.

Such a presumption is remarkable in Rae’s hybrid attitude. Even though he is Scottish he is a strong advocator of the oriental world and its culture. Rae manifests a hybrid lifestyle, through which his house is ornamented with pictures of East architectural and cultural legacies as the novel narrates, “On the wall [of his kitchen], there was a print of the Uleg-Beg Mosque in Samarkand, its exterior designed with the interlacing, intricate patterns of Islamic art.” [2, p.19]. Rae’s constant defence and emphatic tolerance towards Easterners surface as a sequel to his voyages to north African countries and subsequent contact with people over there. His attitude serves as an epitome of the ambivalence of such contacts and proves the reciprocity and hybridity of such encounters.

*Minaret* depicts that “one is not claiming what is “self” against “other” one. Rather it is understood in scrutinizing how self and other, ... east and west ...are intermingled and blended in the postcolonial world as a result of their multifaceted contacts” [10, p.60]. The hybridity of the protagonist is flagged at the onset of the novel. Najwa’s family’s summer vacations in London, their eagerness to the Western lifestyle, and her father’s liberal thinking decline her cultural pure pertinence to the Eastern world. Hybridity is further manifest in the changed habits and lifestyle of Najwa after she moved to live in the UK. Wearing short skirts, as she describes, “In Khartoum I would never wear such a short skirt in public. I might wear it at the club or when visiting friends by car” [1, p.120], and later the veil, protrudes her as a hybrid and ambivalent character. Najwa’s narrative manifests double vision that confluence both worlds.

## Female Identity Crisis

In her book, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, Boehmer pins identity down as one's distinction of all that is pertained as self from that is discerned not to be self [5, p. 76]. Further to such a definition, Mercer tackles the issue of identity crisis as the moments "when something thought to be altered, intelligible and stable is dislodged by the experience of uncertainty and instability" [12, p.43]. The notion of identity in *The Translator* moves from Sammar's belief of herself as solely a Sudanese, and all else excluded, to the recognition of a further appendix, particularly contradictory to the pre-existent entity. An appendix that belonged to what she believed she was not to be. Aberdeen was gradually occupying much of Sammar's self-image and identity. Her wish to return to Aberdeen in spite of her husband's death and her going back to Sudan unveil her homely attachment to the place she viewed as exile. In *Minaret*, however, Najwa was waking up to an opposite reality. Her attempts to lead a Londoner-like lifestyle through embracing Western culture fell short of catering the peace it promised.

The identity crisis that Sammar and Najwa experienced was an accumulation of both the sense of uprootedness and then the processing of irreconcilably antithetical identity affiliations. In the ongoing process, the borders between the self and the other became obscure and intersected. As Edward Said accentuates in the settlements of displacement and the seclusion of exile, assertion to a collectivity and sense of identity—what one is (not), what his/ her loyalties (do not) affiliate to, and where they (do not) belong to, are no longer at anchor. Herein, they become, "the 'other', an opposite, a flaw in the geometry of resettlement, an exodus" [15, p.16-17].

Indeed, what they believed they were (not), ceased to be a clear-cut. Such paradoxical feelings of identity conflict are manifest in the mere fact of living 'here', yet remembering or pondering upon that is 'there', as Aboulela states, "she was heavy with other loyalties, full to the brim with distant places, voices in a language that was not his own" [2, p.29]. They were required to superimpose and re-frame their loyalties and affiliations. A realization marked in Najwa's awareness of her inner voice, "But that was exactly where I got lost. I did not want to look at these big things because they overwhelmed me. I wanted me, my feelings and dreams,..." [1, p.222].

Identity crisis is prefigured in their attempts to move from one identity status of obscurity to another of fulfillment and realization. Hence, drawing on Erik Erikson's scheme of identity development, crises embody passages and spaces of in-betweenness, binding and, correspondingly, separating the subsequent phases of psychological development from the preceding ones [8, p.4]. Identity confusion prefigures as one's simultaneous attempts to continually fit in their societal environment and likewise to comply with their rising sense of subjectivity and individuality, as a result of one's constant re-assessment and introspection of the inner self and their surroundings and the discrepancy between the two. Accordingly,

identity crisis evidences the presence of building tension between one's past commitments and the piling of newly accumulating insights and encounters with the self and society.

Accountable of their identity confusion is the postcolonial conception of otherness, 'them', as a referential contrary to distinguish one's or a nation's identity and ideology, 'us'. Such is manifest in Sammar's discussion with her friend Yasmin, who always had "a habit of making general statements starting with 'we', where 'we' meant the whole of the Third World and its people" [2, p.11]. For both protagonists, crisis is fuelled by the sense of neither belonging to a country of origin nor fully affiliating to the UK, where they are made self consciousness of their differences and implicitly compelled to live with a perpetual pursuit of refining and hiding those differences.

As Edward Said's explains in his book, titled *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, the sense of not belonging is fended off by being part of a community that shares a common place, traditions, language, and culture [16, p.176]. Individuals, lacking such social and cultural constituents, are destined to the errands of filling such a void. Answers to questions of the whereabouts of beyond the sea mother language, religion, and customs heap up to occupy the utmost importance of their existence.

### Conclusion

This research paper has mined into the depths and confines of immigrants' identity confusion in culturally hybrid abodes through probing Leila Aboulela's depiction of exile. In her novels *The Translator* and *Minaret*, which trace the paths of two young Sudanese women in the UK, displacement, and alienation are accentuated as incentives of the immigrants' identity crisis and likewise as a subsidiary of their acculturation and ambivalence of vision. Through shedding light on hybridity as a cultural mechanism of generative exchange and blending, Sammar and Najwa, despite their differing storylines, are by the end of each novel representative of hybrid yet balanced characters that are not overwhelmed by the imperial dominant culture.

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## ABOULELA'NIN TƏRCÜMƏÇİ VƏ MİNARƏDƏ KİMLİK DANIŞIQLARININ HİBRİD MƏKANLARI

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Hazırkı araşdırma Leyla Aboulela-nın *Tərcüməçi* və *Minarə* romanlarında akkulturasıyanın hibrid məkanlarında şəxsiyyət böhranı təsvirini araşdırır. Müvafiq olaraq, mədəniyyətlərarası və hibrid mübadilə sahəsi kimi özgəninkiləşdirmə, yerdəyişmə və sürgün dinamikasına diqqət yetirilir. Bundan sonra, bu təhlilin mərkəzində Homi Bhabha-nın hibridlik anlayışının mədəni qarışma prosesi kimi aydınlaşdırılması dayanır. Bundan əlavə, o, postkolonial tənqidçilərin şəxsiyyət konsepsiyasına əsaslanır. Sammar və Nəcvanın səyahətləri immiqrant şəxsiyyətinin axıcılığını və mənlik imicini islahat etməkdə hibridliyin gücünü ortaya qoydu. Xüsusilə böhran daha çox baş qəhrəmanların əvvəlki mədəni sabitlik vəziyyəti ilə yeni yaranan və uyğunlaşan versiya arasında bir an kimi təxmin edilir. Bu məqalə Aboulela'nın daha çox mədəni saflığın

durğunluğunu coşduran və plüralizmi gücləndirən hibridlik versiyasını nümayiş etdirdiyi qənaətinə gəlir. Qəhrəmanlar digərinin mədəni səltənətinə girmək üçün kifayət qədər qeyri-müəyyən, lakin onun təxribatçı gücü ilə boğulmaq üçün yaxşı köklənmiş kimi təsvir edilmişdir.

**Açar sözlər:** özgələşmə, diaspora, köçürmə, hibridlik, aradaııq

## ГИБРИДНЫЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВА ПЕРЕГОВОРОВ ОБ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ В КНИГЕ Л. АБУЛЕЛЫ «ПЕРЕВОДЧИК» И «МИНАРЕТ»

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Настоящее исследование рассматривает кризис идентичности в гибридных пространствах аккультурации в романах Лейлы Абулелы «Переводчик» и «Минарет». Автор обращает особое внимание на аспекты отчуждения, перемещения и динамики изгнания как сферы межкультурного и гибридного обмена. В центре внимания данного анализа находится точка зрения Хоми Бхабхи о концепции гибридности, как процесса культурного смешения. Кроме того, автор обращается к концепции идентичности постколониальных критиков. Путешествия Саммары и Наджвы раскрыли изменчивость идентичности иммигрантов и силу гибридности в реформировании самооценки. Кризис, в частности, скорее предвосхищается как момент между предыдущим состоянием главных героев. В статье, автор приходит к выводу, что Абулела продемонстрировала версию гибридности, которая восхищает стагнацией культурной чистоты и питает плюрализм. Персонажи изображаются достаточно амбивалентными, чтобы вторгнуться в культурную сферу другого, но глубоко укоренившимися, чтобы быть подавленными его подрывной силой.

**Ключевые слова:** отчуждение, diaspora, перемещение, гибридность, промежуточное положение.

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