

Of Migration and Translation:

How Immigrants Translate and are Translated in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies" and Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

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Abstract

Mobility across borders is imperative in both migration and translation; the two phenomena are responsible for carrying meanings across linguistic and cultural processes. This paper discusses the implications of translation as encountered by immigrants, namely in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies" and Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*, to understand how migration and translation together formulate and reformulate plural identities in the globalized phase of modernity. It incorporates the notions of cultural translation and self-translation, as theorized by Homi Bhabha, Michel Cronin and Loredana Polezzi, alongside linguistic translation to study translation as a mode of human existence.

Migration, or the movement of people, have necessitated translation through the ages and translation, the carrying of meaning across languages or cultures, has facilitated migration. The etymological implications of the words, migration and translation (shift and carrying across) convey a sense of mobility which, in both cases also involve the crossing of borders. As migration has become an undeniable element of globalization, translation has been established as a necessary fact of life to understand and engage with the global flows of modernity, or scapes as formulated by Arjun Appadurai – of people (ethnoscapes), technology (technoscapes), money (financescapes), information and images (mediascapes) and ideas (ideoscapes). A case can be made for translation to be considered as the genre of the zeitgeist, on similar grounds which establish migration's position as a defining force of

the globalized age. Translation as a genre extends beyond the translations of literature, which are increasingly being considered for literary prizes and awards, to encompass interpretations and adaptations in contexts unfamiliar to the already existing text to explore the possibilities of the original. These explorations, which do not always garner approval, do still manage to serve a fundamental purpose of translation – attempting an understanding across diversities, by establishing a common ground, one which proves relatable to all parties concerned. The paper, however, will largely be focusing on cultural translation as the process through which diverse cultures negotiate their commonalities and approach a resolution.

The global flows and the tools to converse with and participate in them, with their implicit mobility and fluidity, together disrupt the notions of home, identity, community, nation state and its associated languages and cultures as stable, fixed and solid entities. The mobility inherent in ethnoscaples denotes all possible movements of people as refugees, exiles and migrant workers, most often seeking permanent settlement and also as tourists, or those who travel occasionally, or seasonally for work. The paper will analyze the translational elements involved in migration and how immigrants, both belonging to the first and the second generations, construct identities using various kinds of translations available to them through the short story, “Interpreter of Maladies” (1999) by Jhumpa Lahiri and the novel, *The Translator* (1999) by Leila Aboulela. In addition, the paper will also explore how immigrants are translated by the dominant cultures of both the countries of their birth or their parents’ birth, and the countries to which they have immigrated.

Jhumpa Lahiri is an American writer, born to immigrant parents of Indian origin, making her a second-generation immigrant, and Leila Aboulela is identified as a Sudanese writer who was born in Egypt, raised in Sudan and has settled in Scotland, after years of living in various countries. Lahiri has once remarked, “I translate, therefore I am”; her statement as an immigrant writer, straddling multiple cultures, suggests translation as a contingent element in defining the self, of not simply the individual migrant but also, in defining the migrant-self as a condition to inhabit the globalized world (“Intimate Alienation” 120). If the Enlightenment human, distinguished himself from animals and all who came before him by making thought as the prerequisite for the category of human, the globalized human, epitomized in the migrant, has made translation *the* imperative. Lahiri’s remark is also reminiscent of Salman Rushdie’s observation that the British Indian writers are “translated men”, who have been carried across continents physically, linguistically and culturally (17). If migrant writers are translated people, then Lahiri, being a second-

generation immigrant is twice-translated. She does not speak Bengali, the language of her parents, and acknowledges that Calcutta is not her home, just her parents' hometown and that her representation of India is her "translation of India" ("Intimate Alienations" 118). Aboulela, on the other hand, insists on Sudan being her home and carries her culture and faith with her, defining herself based on all the places she has lived in. Her protagonist in *The Translator*, Sammar, like her, chooses Sudan as her home despite being born in Britain, as she grew up in Sudan with her extended family. If these writers and their fiction are any indication, home is not the geographical location of one's birth, but the language and culture one identifies with, which very well could be plural and in flux.

What globalization has made evident is the irreversibility and permanence of pluralism, which, together with the improbability of a "world-scale consensus on world-views and values" causes the major problem of the time, in Zygmunt Bauman's opinion – "communication across traditions" (143). He argues that the problem calls for specialists in translation between cultures, which could enable the "art of civilized conversation" (Bauman 144). Just as linguistic or literary translations through the ages have enabled and enriched conversation, cultural translation too enables communication which, consequently leads to or, approximates consensus despite differences. Grounding cultural translation as the precondition for civilized conversation to inhabit a world of differences, the paper studies the translation of and by immigrants as an instrument of addressing and perhaps, resolving cultural conflicts.

The two texts, "Interpreter of Maladies", and *The Translator*, have been selected to examine how immigrants employ translation to engage with the culture of the 'host' country – which could be either the country of their parents, as is the case with Lahiri's story, or the country to which they immigrate, which is the case in Aboulela's novel – and, how immigrants are translated by the natives of the host country. In Lahiri's story, the Das family, who are settled in New Jersey, is visiting their parents in India and taking a vacation in Konark. They hire a tourist guide, Mr. Kapasi, who also works as an interpreter for a doctor, translating Gujarati patients and their illnesses to find the right cure. The wife, Mina Das, finds this romantic and enquires more about his job. Mr. Kapasi, who finds the Das family unconventional and the couple distant, develops an interest in the woman, which he imagines would flourish into a relationship in the future until she opens up about her pain – an affair with her husband's friend – hoping for a potential respite offered by Kapasi's interpretation. Her affair and the fact that her husband is not the father of her second child has been known

only to her, and when she does reveal it to Mr. Kapasi, he is repulsed and insulted that he translates her pain as guilt, leaving her to feel betrayed. The failure in correctly translating the immigrant by the native and the subsequent loss of communication becomes the source of the story's sense of tragedy or, the lack of resolution to the conflict. *The Translator* has Sammar, a widow, finding love again in Scotland with Rae Isles, a lecturer of History with an interest in the Third World and Islam, for whom she works as a translator. Despite his love for Sammar and the academic interest in Islam, he refuses her demands for religious conversion as a necessary condition for their marriage. Enraged and disappointed, she goes back to Sudan with the plans to never return finding peace at 'home'. Rae eventually converts to Islam and comes down to meet her and relatives to get married. The resolution of the conflict is reached through translation, as religious conversion –a carrying across of the individual from one ideology to another.

In both the texts, the migrants are observed as employing various types of translation to traverse new landscapes, ranging from linguistic translations and cultural translations to translations of the self. Sammar is employed at the local university in Aberdeen, Scotland, as a translator of “historical texts, news articles in Arab newspapers” and even political manifestos (Aboulela 5). Despite this, she struggles to find the English equivalent of several Arabic words, such as *habbahan*, without which her soup “would not taste right, would not be complete” (Aboulela 97). She could not find the right word from her Arabic-English dictionary and ended up searching for it frantically, without help, without the right words. Until she found it, *habbahan* did not exist for her in English – its existence was made possible only through translation, by finding its name in English, whole green cardamom.

In “Interpreter of Maladies”, Mr. Kapasi is the translator who, though is not an immigrant, is employed in the service of Gujarati patients who do not speak Oriya. They are, as Mrs. Das comments, “totally dependent” on him and a great deal more than they are dependent on the doctor; were he to mistranslate the kind of pain the patient is suffering from, the doctor could make a wrong diagnosis (“Interpreter” 55). The migrant patients, who have not assimilated the language of the new culture, become severely dependent on bilingual people who translate for them. Michael Cronin believes that this effectively curtails their right to “exercise autonomous forms of translation” (where the immigrant is in control of the translational exchange) as opposed to heteronymous forms, where others are in control of the translation (*Migration and Identity* 54). Through assimilative translation strategies, such as learning the language and its various registers, the immigrant can remain in control of the

translation as Lahiri's immigrant family demonstrates. The Das family speaks a colloquial variant of American English as Lynn Blin notes, which grants them autonomy while residing in America; their inability to speak any Indian language, however, made them dependent on their tourist guide, Mr. Kapasi (167). Mrs. Das's inability to understand Hindi results in her being a passive victim of eve-teasing; unable to comprehend the phrase yelled at her from a Hindi song, she does not react to the encounter. Mr. Kapasi, on whom the family is dependent, does not offer to translate the phrase; he simply becomes complicitous in the act of harassment. In the lack of translation, the immigrant becomes an object without agency when unequal power relations are played out in the dominant culture of the natives.

Appearing to balance the scales, the (second generation) immigrant too uses cultural devices with which they are familiar to interpret the host culture. Mr. Das's (mis)understanding of India comes directly from the tourist guidebooks, which appears "as if it had been published abroad" ("Interpreter" 46). Like Lahiri, Mr. Das's translation of India is heavily mediated by non-Indian sources with which he relates better whereas India is only the country of their parents, which is playing host at the moment. The curiosity of the American tourist, which exoticizes the man on the bullock cart and the monkeys guides his translation. The Das family appeared to Mr. Kapasi as Indians, while they "dressed as foreigners did" – owing to a cultural translation they have undergone to be assimilated into the American landscape. Kapasi's observation of Mr. Das's likeness to an American with regard to the latter squeezing his hands at the time of their introduction is further proof to this. The second-generation immigrants are better accustomed to the social codes of the country of their birth, rather than that of their parents' culture. Sammar's cultural translation mostly involves domesticating the new cultural terrain of the West into her traditions; she fasts during the season of Christmas to make up for the days she could not during Ramadan. She, however, remains deferential to the social codes of Scotland; even though she wants to chide Diane for her callousness in reacting to Rae's illness, she stops herself from doing so, because she understands that she is not "allowed to speak like that" in her present locale (Aboulela 77). The above incident makes it evident that only through a combination of assimilative and accommodative translational practices of culture can an immigrant find her space in the new land.

Fashioning of migrant identities

Loredana Polezzi argues that both postcolonial and migrant writing have made it necessary to enlarge the definition of translation to incorporate self-translation within it and that such exercises at translating the self are dominantly experienced either as loss, or the betrayal of the mother tongue, home community and native traditions or, in other cases, are marked with “a greater freedom and a wider choice” (“Translation and migration” 351). Sammar, while experiencing a profound sense of loss of home and community, interestingly, manages to define her individual self with a greater sense of agency and autonomy in Scotland. Her shopping trip for a new coat is made memorable because “she had a choice” between several colours and styles whereas, when she was home her aunt’s taste in clothes guided her selection, of the “ideal” (Aboulela 68). Even when one of the coats reminds her and made her miss the aunt, she carefully stays clear of it, knowing well that it would have pleased her aunt. Away from home, she is independent to translate herself without the mediations of her immediate community and its norms and expectations. Her discovery of a particular *hadith* in Scotland, despite spending most of her life in Sudan, is equally telling of the influences the home community have in shaping an individual’s identity. The *hadith* which translates the best *jihad* as one which happens while speaking truth to the tyrant ruler is absent from Islamic education because, as Rae concludes, most Muslim countries ruled by dictatorships would not authorize a hadith which is conspicuous in its dissent (Aboulela 108). Away from home, she enjoys a certain distance and freedom to translate her own religion better through learning.

The Das family, being second-generation immigrants, do not experience loss the way Sammar would, for the customs of their parents are alien to them. They, in fact, complicate the notion of home community as a stable and fixed category. Perhaps, Mrs. Das’s pain can be read as stemming from a need to belong and the lack of a home community with which she can identify and the isolation she thus experiences has prompted her demand to be translated by the native, Mr. Kapasi. The ‘home’ she is accustomed to in America does not fulfill her emotionally or socially, causing her to seek a community in the home of her parents. The translational experiences of immigrants and their need for them disrupt the comfortable binaries which classify such experiences in terms of exclusive losses or gains. Translation of loss and gainful translations together contribute to the fashioning of a distinct immigrant identity that has at its heart a hybrid hyphenation, according to Homi K. Bhabha. The migrant identity, being crafted by multiple translations, is “continually, contingently,

‘opening out’, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference”, be it class, gender, or race (Bhabha 219).

Michel Cronin observes that the condition of the migrant is the condition of the translated being, where the movement implies a physical sense of displacement along with a symbolic sense of “shifting from one way of speaking, writing about and interpreting the world to another” (*Translation and Identity* 45). The second-generation immigrants in their twice-translated existence are culturally quite distant and displaced from the culture of their parents, who are hybrid, translated beings themselves. The doubly-distant Das family is therefore beyond Mr. Kapasi’s reach of interpretation or comprehensibility. The gender element as a point of departure in their cultures and identities are causing hindrance to his translation of the couple. Attuned to the social codes of America, Raj and Mina Das address each other using their first names; Mina argues with her husband to take their daughter to the restroom; such notions of woman as the man’s equal in marriage perhaps are alien to Mr. Kapasi, because he expects his wife to serve him his tea in silence (“Interpreter” 62). Since he cannot identify with them, he mistranslates them, just as he assumes the wrong connotation of the word ‘romantic’ and imagines the possibility of a romantic relationship between Mrs. Das, because she found his profession to be romantic. The translated beings find it difficult to belong to a single place or a single community. They very often belong to multiple groups and are barred entry precisely because of the multiplicity in their origins/identity; their quest for belongingness is the quest of Hayavadana, having been born to human and horse.

In addition to assimilative strategies of self-translation, the immigrant also makes use of accommodative practices that leave room for resistance and negotiations with the dominant culture. The untranslatable elements of the migrant’s existence can be read as offering resistance, in the same vein as Bhabha theorized the resistance of the postcolonial native – resistance, “not necessarily as an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the ‘content’ of another culture, as difference is perceived” but, as the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of dominating discourses (110). Yasmin, Sammar’s friend, though a second-generation immigrant of Pakistani origins, refuses to identify with the West where she was raised, and instead identifies with the Asian or Arab context or the Third World in general. She constantly maintains the distinction of ‘we’ and ‘them’ –how ‘we are not like them’, or ‘we have close family ties, not like them – which, while offering resistance, also results in generalizing and simplifying the complexities

of the migrant identity (Aboulela 11). Generalization, like ambivalence, then becomes a methodology for the migrant to devise translations.

Hostility and hospitality

Michael Cronin, via A. Brah, argues that the policies of translation we adopt are reliant on the conceptualization of differences and reactions to them (*Translation and Identity* 47). When the cultural, social differences are conceptualized simply as unproblematic ways of doing things differently, the translator is rather hospitable to the object of translation; however, on being perceived as a threat to one's own way of life, the differences are treated with hostility and these responses considerably influence the policies employed for the purpose of translation. When cultural departures are perceived as threatening, the ensuing translational practices betray hierarchical relations, to impress upon the reader the inferiority of the threats. Imperialist translations of the cultural texts of the colonies reveal the insecurities of the colonizers as they all bear a heightened sense of superiority of their culture, which are strengthened by the inherent differences that distinguish the cultures of the colonies from that of the colonizer.

During the Gulf War, Sammar was accosted by a stranger on the streets – who yelled “Saddam Hussein, Saddam Hussein” at her – translating her as a religious fundamentalist for wearing hijab (Aboulela 99). The hostile stranger, who does not even possess the adequate vocabulary to translate her, utilizes the popular image of a Muslim ruler who had recently come to be viewed as a threat to America, and by extension, the world. Yasmin's hostility towards Sammar becomes visible when the possibility of her marriage with Rae arises; Yasmin advises Sammar to find a Sudanese man, instead of Rae, so that the marriage does not challenge her worldview that has categorized the West and the Third World as distinct binaries. Rae has a better understanding of Sammar owing to his hospitality, which in itself is hinged on the perspectives on Islam he has gathered through his role as a (Left, liberal) academic. Similarly, the hospitality of the native, Mr. Kapasi, towards the second-generation immigrant, Mina Das, translates her simply as an unhappy wife and later, as a potential romantic interest. The hospitality is extended in so far as she does not upset his worldview; the revelation of her affair threatens his conventional notions of family and the gender roles in marriage steeped in patriarchal conditioning. Insulted, he feels forced to adopt a moralistic stance, which interprets her pain as a “common, trivial little secret” of guilt from being unfaithful to her husband and resulting in the failure of translation (“Interpreter” 68). Her

desperation, borne out of loneliness and a desire for belongingness, which made her reach out to him in the first place and encouraged his fantasy, was lost on him.

Hospitality in an immigrant is essential for her survival in the new culture, and it becomes manifest in an eagerness to be translated into the dominant language and culture. As mentioned earlier, the inability to be assimilated into the 'host' culture restricts the migrant's opportunity to autonomous forms of migration which, as Cronin argues, further prevents their participation in the public sphere (*Translation and Identity* 53). The desire to appear, communicate and conduct oneself like the native compels the immigrants to wear clothes, speak the language, and observe the social mores particular to the location; their similitude with the natives could successfully be translated into citizenship, permanent residence and, perhaps even a new home and community. It is interesting to note that, in her search for belongingness, Mina Das offers an invitation to the native of her parents' homeland to translate her. It is further proof to the interstitial, liminal space occupied by the immigrants in relation to the cultures they are acquainted with and engage in.

A hostile immigrant, who refuses to be translated into the dominant culture, is a symbol of resistance as it has been established earlier through Bhabha. Cronin too suggests that the "demand for translation into the immigrant's language becomes a conscious form of resistance" (*Translation and Identity* 56). Sammar's insistence of translation into her language which materializes through Rae's conversion into Islam can be argued as an attempt to remain faithful to her traditions. Here, she interestingly has more in common with Mr. Kapasi, in their capacity as translators, than with Mrs. Das – they both act as translators with guardian syndrome. Guardian syndrome, in Geoff Mulgan's words, is one which attaches value to "hierarchy, loyalty, prowess, ostentation, honour and exclusivity", as opposed to the trader syndrome which values "thrift, industry, optimism, voluntary agreements, honesty, invention and collaboration with strangers, and rights and duties associated with contracts" (66). By remaining loyal to their respective cultures and ideologies, they act as bulwarks against 'foreign' elements that threaten their culture which, consequentially diminish the chances for inter-cultural translation and exchange.

Objects and subjects of translation

Immigrants, engaged in cultural translation, 'introduce newness' (according to Bhabha) into the dominant culture whereby they simultaneously become objects and subjects of translation. In the absence of autonomous translation, they are reduced to objects without

agency. When Mr. Kapasi chose to translate Mina Das as Mrs. Das despite her protestations, uncovering the patriarchal structures of the society he inhabits, and in denying her demand for further translation, he reduces her to the position of an object. The stranger on the street identifying Sammar with Saddam Hussein is another example of depreciating the immigrant to a mere object. Denying translation therefore implies denying subjectivity of an individual or community, leading to erroneous and often, dangerous translations. The absence of translation, or the mistranslations of the immigrant, are symbolic of the violence associated with migration. The violence inherent in migration does not have to be the violence known only to a refugee or an exile, or the forced detainment of migrants labelled ‘illegal’ by the host country; the violence could be the loss of home and community, and by extension, a polity which, according to Hannah Arendt, guarantees the basic rights of the individual.

By becoming translational subjects, the immigrants claim their agency to translate and alter the dominant discourses to encompass the differences that characterize them or their community. Sammar, in her capacity of linguistic translator at the university and through the exercises in cultural and self-translations which redefine her identity, and as the reason for triggering Rae’s conversion to Islam, reclaims her agency as a subject of translation. However, as Cronin notes, it is “the object which allows the subject to emerge and it is in and through objects that our subjectivity is constructed and endures” (*Translation and Globalization* 9). The resistance demonstrated in Sammar (her demand for Rae’s conversion) and to an extent, in Mr. Kapasi (his mistranslation of Mina), are acts against the perceived threats to their culture caused by globalization’s many incursions, and they establish the characters’ subjectivity by constructing the other as an object. These collective processes of making, unmaking and remaking of identities, boundaries and subjectivities ensure that the conversation is carried forward and the purpose of translation is precisely in the perpetuation of dialogue in a world peopled with plurality. Bauman’s exhortation, “converse or perish” is informed by the persistent need for conversation between communities and individuals of difference which he considers the foundation of civilisation (143).

Translation, the key for conversation in the age of global flows, can choose to acknowledge the differences of diverse cultures, races, religions, or genders and still work to aggravate the inherent differences, often leading to ghettoization, prevalence of identity politics by adopting a multiculturalist framework which is not invested in dialogue. Or, it could adopt an interculturalist framework, which “promotes interaction, understanding and integration among and between different cultures, with a focus of attention on the interaction

between the dominant and minority ethnic communities” (Ging and Malcolm 127). Mr. Kapasi’s notion of cultural differences in a globalized world is restricted to the political disagreement between nations, which, entertains his fantasy of being the interpreter for international dignitaries. The cultural differences between him and the immigrant family of Indian origin could not be bridged for lack of sufficient conversation. Sammar, even though she is categorized as and is given the privileges of an Ethnic Minority in Scotland, becomes the victim of racial harassment caused by an absence of conversation between the dominant and minority communities. Bauman entrusts the elite with the responsibility to interpret or translate, a responsibility that is taken up by the academic, Rae, in his position as the interlocutor between the West and the Third World. His book, *The Illusion of An Islamic Threat*, his appearance as the Third World expert on news channels and his academic interest in Islamic and Third World history are all testament to his role in continuing the conversation between two cultures/ideologies.

Multiculturalism and often, reductionist strands of interculturalism do not address the issues of power; such questions are either ignored or marginalized (*Translation and Identity* 69). Movies such as *Bride and Prejudice*, *Other End of the Line* or in novels such as *The Mistress of Spices* deal with multicultural romances; however, they are superficial explorations, which do not engage with the questions of differences that run deep and the implication of these difference in an equation of power. Lahiri and Aboulela have engaged with these questions by employing retranslation in their respective texts for the reality has been constructed for the Western reader “through incessant cultural translation processes” which, according to Andre Lefevere, translates the non-Western world into Western categories to be able to understand and come to terms with them (77). Aboulela retranslates the word *jihad* as speaking truth to the tyrant ruler, rather than the popular translation of it as holy war. While remaining acutely aware of its many deficiencies, Aboulela informs the reader that Sudan is not merely the disadvantaged, underdeveloped African country; she retranslates her country in terms of the natural beauty of the landscape, the close ties of kinship and the belongingness offered by faith and community. By granting Sammar the agency to construct her own sense of self through negotiative processes of cultural translations, Aboulela also manages to retranslate Islam as a religion which allows for self-fashioning and self-actualization, while remaining true to one’s faith and roots – an image that runs contrary to the Western image of Islam as an oppressive religion, especially towards women.

While Aboulela has the immigrant as the protagonist and the agent of retranslation, Lahiri's protagonist is a native translator, who enacts the processes of retranslation. Considering how retranslation is associated with resistance and agency in a postcolonial framework as Edward Said theorized, the native translator resists the advances of what he recognizes as Western influences – gender parity in marriage, dysfunctionality of the Das family, and a mental health issue or, depression precipitated by a sense of alienation. Kapasi's retranslation of the family at the end of the day or, the picture of them “he would preserve forever in his mind” is of a ‘normal’ family. All the members of the family are seen to be in close contact, which is in contrast with their physical distance throughout the story; the parents are in agreement with each other which is contrasted with their hitherto bickering or silence. More importantly, they are remembered as vigilant and dutiful parents, fussing about and taking care of their children. This image of a perfect, doting family is at odds with the aloofness they have demonstrated towards each other throughout the trip; however, such a translation of the migrant family restores Kapasi's worldview concerning home and family.

Contesting modernity through translation

Michael Cronin, while discussing globalization, warns of the dangers in assuming that there is a single culture, and a singular kind of modernity, “conveniently Western” and that this modernity would spread to the rest of the world (*Translation and Globalization* 33). Lahiri and Aboulela demonstrate that, despite the forces of globalization, the local and the particular do make their resistance visible and offer alternate, non-Western models of multiple modernities. It has already been established that Mr. Kapasi's refusal to correctly translate Mina Das, and Sammar's defiance against assimilation are acts of resistance which are wielded against the homogenizing wave of globalization. While Mr. Kapasi's resistance is limited in his suspension of translation, Sammar's resistance is more elaborate considering how her insistence led to Rae's conversion, implying a de-territorialized quality to Islam. This is so because, as Cronin via Mary Kaldor points out, the more globalization comes to impact on a society or group, the more intense can be the local or specific identification as a way of countering forces that are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as inimical to difference (*Translation and Globalization* 49). The threat of Western modernity to Islamic culture was perhaps conceived as more palpable, because of “the tense relationship between the West and the Middle East” as Rae points out (Aboulela 99). Therefore, Aboulela problematizes the very foundations of Western modernity by questioning its grounding in reason (as secular, objective and universal) alone, which led to the classification of religion (as subjective and

localized) as less than reason. This becomes manifest in Rae, the academic, as his desire is to be objective, while others are deemed as “prejudiced” (126). However, Aboulela considers this objective detachment imperative in establishing superiority – it is “like you are above all of this, above me, looking down ...” (126). The close-mindedness of Western academia founded on reason is critiqued further in Frantz Fanon’s blindness towards the anti-colonialist implications of Islam as observed by Rae.

Sammar’s insistence on translation or religious conversion turns Rae to an object, lacking in agency, just as Kapasi denied agency to Mina Das by denying her translation. In resisting modernity, the translators and their writers only manage to inverse the hierarchy. The translators acting as guardians of their respective cultures, by insisting and denying translations, reveal “their potential to deceive, confound and betray, as well as to act as reliable guides, mediators and witnesses” (“Translation, Travel, Migration” 171). The inversion of the hierarchy does not allow for inter-cultural exchange; instead, it merely indicates the failure of translation once again. This condition begs the question– if objects do help in the construction of the subject, and the inversions of hierarchy is in fact part of the conversation, and untranslatability, despite best efforts, remains an unavoidable part of the translational process, how do we translate better?

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