



## To Love the Orientalist: Masculinity in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper examines representations of Orientalist and Islamic masculinity in Leila Aboulela's The Translator. In her representation of the character of Rae Isles, Aboulela writes back to repressive Western traditions of Orientalist masculinity, fashions a narrative which negotiates a way out of stagnant binaries of West and East, and offers a model of progressive, socially engaged masculinity rooted in Islamic tradition.*

Early in Leila Aboulela's (2001b) *The Translator*, as Sammar and Yasmin leave Rae's flat, Sammar remarks that Rae is "sort of familiar, like people from back home [Sudan]" (p. 21). Yasmin replies, "He's an orientalist. It's an occupational hazard" (p. 21). Sammar is uncomfortable with Orientalism: "[She] did not like the word orientalist. Orientalists were bad people who distorted the image of the Arabs and Islam. Something from school history or literature, she could not remember. Maybe modern orientalists were different" (p. 22). Despite Sammar's evident discomfort, in this moment she holds out the possibility that cross-cultural relationships can exist which do not serve to suppress difference – perhaps the Orientalist can be redeemed. It is this moment in the text which highlights the convergence and interdependence of the discourses of Orientalism, Islam, religion, academia and masculinity within the novel, particularly as they are represented in the character of Rae Isles. I want to explore how Aboulela's representations of Rae ultimately subvert conventional Orientalist notions of masculinity. To do this, I examine how Aboulela's novel writes back not only to Western traditions of Orientalism and romance, but also engages with Aboulela's own Sudanese Islamic literary tradition. Out of this writing-back, Aboulela fashions a narrative which provides a way out of the stagnant binaries of West and East, and repressive constructions of Islam and masculinity.

Writing about women's narratives in the postcolonial Arab world, Miriam Cooke argues:

Women who have learned as feminists to form principled and strategic alliances and networks that allow them to balance their religious, specifically Islamic loyalties, with national, local, class, ethnic, or any other allegiances may be able to invent a contestatory but also enabling discourse within the global context that will not be easily co-opted. They may thus initiate new forms of conversations across what were previously thought to be unbridgeable chasms. (Cooke, 2000, p. 177)

It is in light of Cooke's claims that I explore *The Translator*. First published in 1999, *The Translator* explores the relationship between Sammar, a young Sudanese woman who has recently lost her husband, and Rae Isles, a Scottish academic who studies Middle-Eastern history and gives lectures on Postcolonial Politics. Sammar works for Rae at the University of Aberdeen as a translator of Arabic texts, and over the course of the novel, they develop a romantic relationship. However, as Rae is initially unwilling to convert to Islam in order to marry Sammar, Sammar returns to Khartoum to be with her family and son. Aboulela represents Sammar as a woman who must balance religious and national loyalties with her love for Rae, who must resist co-optation by Orientalist discourse, and who must initiate and sustain a conversation between East and West, Scotland and Sudan. Through her subversion of Orientalist Western masculinity, and her depiction of Rae's eventual conversion to Islam, Aboulela narrates and negotiates a potential bridge across these divides.

The figure of the male Orientalist features prominently in Aboulela's writing. In her story "The Museum," awarded the Caine prize in 2000, Aboulela describes how Shadia, a Sudanese student, finds herself beginning a friendship with Bryan, a Scottish student who has taken a trip to Mecca "In a book" (2001a, p. 112). When Bryan invites her to a museum display about Africa, Shadia finds that "Nothing was of her, nothing belonged to her life at home, what she missed. Here was Europe's vision, the clichés about Africa: cold and old" (2001a, p. 115). Shadia knows that Bryan's vision of Africa, the Africa represented in the museum displays and accessed in books, is a European construction which does not correspond to her lived experience. However, she is unable to engage in dialogue with Bryan and challenge the museum's construction of African identity. When Bryan invites her to speak, offering, "Museums change; I can change..." (2001a, p. 119), Shadia does not respond. The narrator tells us:

If she was strong she would have explained and not tired of explaining. She would have patiently taught him another language, letters curved like the epsilon and gamma he knew from mathematics. She would have showed him that words could be read from right to left. If she was not small in the museum, if she was really strong, she would have made his trip to Mecca real, not only in a book. (Aboulela, 2001a, p. 119)

While Bryan appears to be open to having his Orientalist misconceptions challenged, Shadia feels unable to do so. Her inability to sustain a conversation with Bryan signals a failure to challenge the dominant Orientalist discourses represented in the museum displays. Both she and Brian are victims of the misrepresentation of her culture. In *The Translator*, however, Aboulela provides an alternative narrative for the relationship between a Muslim woman and Orientalist man.

To understand how Orientalist discourse works, especially how it forms and sustains hegemonic notions of masculinity, I want to turn for a moment Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said argues:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it,

authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said, 1994, p. 3)

Said continues: “[Orientalism] is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different ... world” (p. 12). Orientalism, then, is a discourse which enables the West to create, to manipulate, and to control the Orient. The terms Said uses – “dominate,” “authority,” “ruling,” “authorizing” – are familiar words in terms of studies on masculinity. Hegemonic notions of masculinity are intertwined with notions of power and dominance over the feminized Other. Orientalism then, can be understood as a discourse informed by notions of Western masculinity in which the West is strong, upright, rational, and male, while the Orient is weak, passive, irrational, and female (Said, 1994, pp. 137–138). Said recognizes the long-standing relationship between academia, intellectuals and Orientalism; while he acknowledges the fact that scholars may be motivated by a genuine will to understand the Other, many academics, however, play an instrumental role in constructing and sustaining conceptions of the Orient which serve to authorize Western geo-political policies.

It is against this background, then, that we are to understand the representation of Rae Isles: he participates in an academic area of study which is complicit in constructing the West and the Orient in gendered terms. He is already imbricated within a discourse where he is an empowered, mobile, highly masculine figure. Rae is a well-respected scholar in his field – his opinions on Middle Eastern issues are sought by various media outlets, and his book – *“The Illusion of an Islamic Threat”* (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 5) – receives positive reviews. Several times, Sammar remarks that Rae teaches her things about Islam that she doesn’t know (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 93). However, as John Stotesbury (2004) emphasizes, Rae encounters the Muslim world from the subject position of the aloof, detached, objective Western intellectual. Yasmin, Rae’s secretary, also comments on Rae’s attitude towards knowledge, telling Sammar that “[western scholars] could study all sorts of sacred texts and be detached” (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 93). These attributes of detachment and objectivity are what make a good Western scholar. Rae himself tells Sammar, “I believed the best I could do, what I owed a place and people who had deep meaning for me, was to be objective, detached. In the middle of all the prejudice and hypocrisy, I wanted to be one of the few who was saying what was reasonable and right” (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 128). The detachment of the Orientalist masculine subject is what authorizes him to make objective, or ‘right,’ knowledge claims about other cultures. Rae’s perception of his own masculinity is bound up in what he considers to be his capacity to access and make objective knowledge claims while remaining disengaged from any socio-cultural context. His appeals to reason and objectivity simply replicate Orientalist justifications for authorizing representations of the Other.

Sammar’s discomfort with Rae’s status as Orientalist is similar to Shadia’s experience of feeling overwhelmed by the museum displays. However, Sammar has the strength to confront Rae’s Orientalist position. She tells him, “Don’t you realize how much you hurt me staying objective and detached, like you are above all of this,

above me, looking down” (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 128). Her point is that Rae’s professed detachment and objectivity is in fact an illusion. Rae is not able to remain apart from socio-cultural contexts. Instead, Rae’s Orientalist masculinity is tied to his position of privilege and status as a white, European/Western academic, whose intellectual virility allows him to authorize, to know, to understand, and to have power over the Orient. However, while Rae’s academic pursuits make him an Orientalist, Aboulela’s representations of Rae work to subvert this notion of masculinity and power.

The first thing that troubles the notion of Rae as Orientalist is the fact that he needs a translator. He needs Sammar to help him make sense of – to help him read – the Orient. Sammar sees her job as a translator as “moulding Arabic into English, trying to be transparent like a pane of glass not obscuring the meaning of any word” (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 167). She strives for transparency, yet her presence is always already mediating Rae’s access to the texts he studies. She chooses the words that he works with. Because translation always involves interpretation, Sammar’s role as intermediary between Arabic and English begins in her interpretation of the texts she translates for Rae. Denys Johnson-Davies (1983), a translator of several Arabic texts, including *Season of Migration to the North*, explains that when working on translating Hadiths and other religious texts, “accuracy must have ascendancy over any other consideration” (p. 83). Sammar herself privileges accuracy in her translations of Hadiths; in a conversation with Rae about a text she has found, she elaborates on the way she would have altered the translation of one of the Qudsi Hadiths (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 42).<sup>2</sup> In the translation of sacred texts, achieving accuracy for Sammar means to not obscure the meaning of a given passage. Her practice of translation acknowledges that meanings are not static and fixed, but are contested and contingent upon specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. Her work challenges the sense of detachment and objectivity prized by Western academic discourse. For Sammar, understanding texts, particularly sacred texts, is inseparable from engaging with the subject matter of those texts.

Another way the novel’s representation of Rae challenges Orientalist notions of Western masculinity is through Rae’s illness. Rae is not a physically strong person. Where Western notions of intellectual activity have traditionally associated the masculine with the disembodied mind, Rae’s intellect is fastened to a dying animal. Rae and Sammar are aware of the fact of Rae’s embodiment, of the fact that he is not a disengaged, disembodied intellect. Stotesbury (2004) argues that Rae’s physical weakness and hospitalization “permits Sammar to approach him on terms of approximate equality” (pp. 74–75). His conversations with Sammar and his academic work are interrupted either by violent coughing fits or by his hospitalization. Thus, Rae’s illness represents the inherent contradictions involved in the notion of Orientalist masculinity. While Rae may claim to be objective, rational, and disengaged, in reality, his body’s emphatic announcement of its presence reveals these Orientalist notions as illusory. Rae’s illness then, is emblematic of a specific hegemonic notion of masculinity in crisis.

Aboulela further elaborates the theme of masculinity in crisis by having Rae recount one of his dreams. He tells Sammar, “I was in a big house with many rooms. It was almost like a mansion. I was hiding because outside the house I had been followed, chased for days. I carried a sword in my hand and there was blood on it,

my enemies' blood, but I myself, my clothes and my hands were clean and I was proud of that" (2001b, p. 95). He continues:

I went into a room full of smoke, a lot of smoke but when I checked there was no fire. When I left the room, the handle of my sword broke. I held it broken in my hands and knew that it could never be mended, it could never be reliable again. This was a terrible loss, I don't know why, but I had this feeling of deep loss because I had to go on without the sword. (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 95)

The phallic imagery of the broken sword is clearly suggestive of masculinity in crisis. The blood suggests that the particular conception of masculinity here is one of violence and domination. At the end of the dream, Rae mourns the loss of the power this version of masculinity has conferred upon him. The dream suggests that Rae will no longer be able to authorize truth claims about the Other. There are also strong resonances in this dream with the notion of jihad as an internal spiritual struggle. We could read this dream as suggestive of the way Rae struggles with the notion of conversion to Islam. Again, Rae's clothes are clean, as he has so far been able to remain disengaged from professing any religious commitments. However, the loss of the sword signals that this disengagement is no longer sustainable. The central thrust of the dream is to reinforce the notion of masculinity in crisis, of hegemonic Orientalist articulations of masculinity being no longer available to Rae.

Having explored some of the ways in which Aboulela disrupts hegemonic narratives of Orientalist masculinity in her representations of Rae, I now want to turn to the way Aboulela's novel engages with both Western and Eastern literary traditions and representations of Orientalism and masculinity. Aboulela engages with these discourses to open up new conversations and spaces for female agency and cross-cultural, transnational contact. Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* has a strong influence on Aboulela's novel. First published in Arabic in 1966, a decade after Sudan achieved independence, Salih's novel focuses primarily on two characters: an unnamed narrator, and Mustapha Sa'eed. Mustapha, as a young Sudanese student, travels first to Cairo, where he is cared for by the Robinsons, and then to London, where he engages in the sexual conquest of several British women, leading them to commit suicide. After spending time in prison for the murder of his English wife Jean Morris, Mustapha returns to Sudan, where he recounts his story to the narrator. As several scholars have pointed out, Salih's novel is itself a writing-back to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In Salih's novel, the Arab/African subject voyages to Europe on a mission of postcolonial revenge. Said explains:

[I]f you look at it more deeply, it not only contains within it the history of decolonization and reaction to Western imperialism, but it also, in my opinion, deepens the tragedy by showing this man's reactive revenge, which to many readers in the Third World, in the Arab and African world, is a just revenge. But Salih does it fresh because it's futile, pathetic, and ultimately tragic. Because it reinforces the cycle of isolation as insufficiency of the politics of identity. It is not enough to just be a black wreaking havoc on a white, there's another world you have to live in. (Said, 2001, pp. 110–111)

Said's argument is that Salih's novel narrates a reaction of revenge against Western imperialism and greed. However, Mustapha's revenge, while it may appear to be just, is ultimately trapped in the binary opposition between East and West, and traps Mustapha in Orientalist discourses of power and masculinity.

The figure of the Orientalist looms large in Salih's novel. Indeed, Mr. Robinson (Ricky) and his wife, who are Mustapha's first guides in Cairo, are themselves Orientalists. Mrs. Robinson explains her conception of the role of the Orientalist when she describes the work of her husband: "I shall write of the splendid services Ricky rendered to Arab culture, such as his discovery of so many rare manuscripts, and the commentaries he wrote on them, and the way he supervised the printing of them" (Salih, 1970, p. 148). The role of the Orientalist here is to "discover" the Orient, to comment on it, and to authorize its reproduction. As Mustapha's guides, the Robinsons play an important role in shaping his conceptions of the Orient and Occident, informing how he presents himself to Europe. As Brian Gibson (2002) argues, Mustapha becomes "a self-fabricated Othello, a man who presented himself as the exotic Oriental savage in order to tempt women" (para. 5). Mustapha, according to Gibson, chooses to inhabit the subject position of the Oriental as it has been defined by Orientalism. His actions become a performance which reinforces Western stereotypes. Indeed, Mustapha has the impulse, as he listens to his lawyer try to defend him, to stand up and claim, "This Mustapha Sa'eed does not exist. He's an illusion, a lie. I ask of you to rule that the lie be killed" (Salih, 1970, p. 32). He realizes that he has tailored his self-image to reinforce Orientalist conceptions of the Arab man. His self-perceived male vocation to "liberate Africa with my penis" (Salih, 1970, p. 120) legitimates, or acquiesces to, the models of Arab and African masculinity laid out by Western Orientalist discourse.

Aboulela acknowledges her literary debt to Salih's novel by using a quotation from the *Season of Migration to the North* to introduce Part II of *The Translator*. Stephan Guth (2003) claims that Aboulela inserts this quotation for two reasons. First, Aboulela wants to show Western readers "that there is also a great indigenous Arab literary heritage, that there exist also *Oriental* experiences, values, traditions and wisdom which can be drawn upon and which are in no way inferior to their Western equivalents" (p. 6). Second, Guth claims that Aboulela intends "to show herself as *belonging* to this tradition, to give the impression of a *harmony* between the great (though secular) tradition and her Islamic humanism" (p. 6). Aboulela's project, as Guth understands it, is to acknowledge and privilege an Arabic literary tradition within which she sees herself participating. Indeed, the similarities between Aboulela's novel and Salih's are many. Both narrate the journeys of Oriental Sudanese subjects to Britain, reversing the Eurocentric point of view of imperial travel narratives. Both narrate the return of the Sudanese subject to Sudan. And both narrate intimate relationships between Western and Eastern subjects.

However, Sammar's journey provides an alternative to the discourse of Orientalist masculinity which manifests itself in Sa'eed's sexual conquests. Geoffrey Nash (2002) argues that Aboulela's writing is situated "within the feminized space which may be said to operate between the continuing pressures of Western cultural imperialism, and conservative, anti-modernist cultural Islamism" (p. 28). Aboulela's characters, rather than capitulating to the dominant competing discourses of Orientalism and what Nash identifies as "Islamism," negotiate a new vision by

rejecting the imposition of over-determined Orientalist subjectivities. As we have seen, the novel carefully subverts the authority invested in Orientalist masculinity and knowledge/power. However, both Rae and Sammar reject the positions of the young terrorist who claims, “Western men worship money and women. Some of them see the world through dollar bills, some of them see the world through the thighs of a woman” (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 159). Although Rae acknowledges that these groups have “plenty to protest about” (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 28), he does not see their policies as a “viable alternative” (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 29). Sammar claims that the spelling mistakes and stains on their written manifesto are “pathetic,” and that the manifesto itself gives “a sense of people overwhelmed” (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 27). By rejecting the binary oppositions offered by both Orientalist discourse and the rhetoric of terrorist groups, Aboulela’s characters articulate an alternative vision.

It is relevant here that Guth claims, “The majority of Western reviewers relate the novel to an extra-literary context, which in most cases is Islamic extremism. They praise Aboulela’s ‘seriousness’ and ‘moderation’ in contrast to the discourse of ‘fundamentalist’ radicals” (p. 14). Guth draws attention to the fact that Aboulela’s novel, while it challenges Western literary and discursive traditions, also makes sure to distance itself from the rhetoric of what Western reviewers would call “Islamic fundamentalism.” The rhetoric of “moderation” and “seriousness” employed in the reviews situates the novel within the boundaries of acceptable public discourse, as opposed to narratives which are “strident” or “fundamentalist” or “apologies for terrorism.” While the rhetoric of moderation may be appropriated by reviewers to avoid discussion of the root causes of protest and social unrest in the Middle East, it seems that Aboulela wants to narrate a genuinely viable alternative to the reductive discourse of a “clash of civilizations” – a narrative ultimately underpinned by Orientalist ideology.

Aboulela is aware of her text as a writing-back to not only the male Arab literary tradition, but also to various literary traditions in the West, such as the tradition of English romance. In *The Translator*, Aboulela gently disrupts and subverts some of the conventions of romance narratives. According to Stotesbury (2004), in *The Translator*, “romantic heterosexual fulfillment can be achieved not through negotiation with the desired male but by means of a complex three-way accommodation that involves woman, man, and God” (p. 80). In other words, Aboulela complicates the standard romance narrative by making the success of the heterosexual romantic liaison contingent upon a successful integration of the desires, or perceived desires, of the man, the woman and God. However, Aboulela does not so much insert religious convention into the romance narrative as she recodifies the religious dilemmas, which are invisible because unexamined, already inherent in Western romance narratives. Aboulela writes:

I was often asked “Why should Rae convert, why should religion be an obstacle etc. etc?” In my answer I would then fall back on *Jane Eyre* and say “From an Islamic point of view, why can’t Mr. Rochester be married to both Bertha and Jane?” In the same way that I, as a Muslim reader, respect and empathize with Jane’s very Christian dilemma, I want Western/Christian readers to respect and empathize with Sammar’s very Muslim dilemma. (Cited in Stotesbury, 2004, p. 81)

In other words, while the presence of Islam or religious belief and custom might seem intrusive in the novel, what Aboulela does by including it is to force us to examine how romance narratives are already encoded within Western, Christian religious conventions which often remain invisible to Western readers.

The relationship between Rae and Sammar also challenges a literary tradition of very specific gendered Western discourses about relationships between the East and West. Gayatri Spivak (1999), in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, raises for discussion the idea that most narratives of cross-cultural relationships can be reduced to the claim: "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (p. 284). Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) examines Spivak's claim and elaborates the ways in which Muslim women were (and continue to be) represented in the popular media and by the current Bush administration as a means to justify the war in Afghanistan, and the larger 'War on Terrorism' as necessary in order to save or liberate Afghan women. It is partly to contest this larger hegemonic discourse of white men saving brown women that Aboulela writes her novel.

A conventional Western narrative of the relationship between Rae and Sammar might be reduced to the narrative Spivak claims underlies Western, Orientalist romances. According to this tradition, Rae ought to save Sammar from her 'backwards,' 'primitive' culture. However, *The Translator* refuses to be reduced in this way. In fact, the novel reverses the conventional rescue narrative and asserts a story in which a brown woman saves a white man from white men (and by white men I mean notions of white masculinity). It is Sammar's soup which restores Rae's health, and Sammar tells Rae that conversion to Islam "would be good for you, it will make you stronger" (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 89). Sammar does not need a white man to save her. Instead, she saves Rae, both physically and spiritually.

Rae's conversion ascribes agency firmly in the hands of the West's Other. Stotesbury (2004) suggests that "such novels [as Aboulela's] reiterate an implacable creed: for an Islamic woman to envisage personal fulfillment with a Western man, there is only one alternative: the man's conversion to Islam" (p. 80). Stotesbury reads a form of reverse colonization at work in the novel, where the only solution to bridging cultures is for a Western man to convert to Islam. However, I think that this reading is limited in important ways, as the novel clearly acknowledges that there are ways of subverting the requirement for "genuine" conversions (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 92). Indeed, a refusal on Rae's part to convert would have upheld the narrative of Western values of detachment and objectivity – would have reified Islamic tradition as pre-modern, as something to be circumvented. Ferial Ghazoul refers to Rae's conversion and claims:

Though this unexpected reversal is unconvincing, it is prepared for by the fact that Sammar has gradually recognized that her wanting Rae to convert is strictly egotistical. Consequently, she relinquishes such motives and prays for him to convert for the salvation and peace of his soul, and not in order to be an eligible husband for her. She wants him to discover -- for his own good -- God and His words, as well as Islam and its glory. (Ghazoul, 2001, para. 11)

Rae's conversion signals an alternative to the detached, objective masculinity of Orientalism which manipulates and dominates. Rae's conversion signals that he is

willing to explore an engaged subjectivity as a man who understands not just as a disembodied intellect, but as an embodied believer.

It might help to shed light on Rae's conversion if we remember that Aboulela is effectively writing-back to the West. As Ghazoul (2006) writes, "Arab writers who write in English, French, and Italian are no longer seen as traitors opting out of their own culture and into the culture of the (ex-)colonizers, but as cultural ambassadors who are able to voice a previously silenced point of view" (pp. 121–122). She argues, "with today's proliferation of the phenomenon of 'writing-back,' we find writers from former colonies using precisely the language of the colonizers to question those cultures' representations of the Other" (p. 121). It is as a form of 'writing-back' that we should read Aboulela's novel. In an essay where she reflects upon her own writing practice, Aboulela (2002) says, "To prove that Khartoum is nicer than London, more beautiful than Edinburgh ... I don't think so. Not to prove, but to express, to show that it is a valid place, a valid way of life beyond the stereotypical images of famine and war, not a backward place to be written off" (p. 204). Aboulela's project is not to negate Scottish or English or Western values, but rather to assert the validity of her own Sudanese and Islamic worldview. Her choice of the word 'express' rather than 'prove' to describe her intentions reveals a distrust of binary opposition and argumentation, a distrust of the rhetoric of the clash of civilizations.

Rae's conversion also serves as a narrative antidote to the popular notion that Muslim societies must 'convert' or be converted to democracy, that Islamic societies must convert to Western notions of freedom and of secular humanism. On a purely narrative level, Rae's conversion is a relatively implausible *deus ex machina*. However, within the larger social context of Western neo-imperialism and globalization, Rae's conversion reinforces the validity of Islam as a worldview which offers a promise of social justice and resistance. Sammar tells Rae that "The first believers were mostly women and slaves. I don't know why, maybe they had softer hearts, I don't know" (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 126). Rae replies, "Maybe in changing they did not have much to lose ... It was the rulers of Makkah who were reluctant to give up their traditions and established ways for something new" (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 126). This exchange positions Islam as a religion of the oppressed. Sammar and Rae explicitly identify Islam as a religion which offers the potential for liberation and dignity to women and slaves – the oppressed classes. Indeed, Rae later tells Sammar, "What I regret most ... is that I used to write things like 'Islam gives dignity to those who otherwise would not have dignity in their lives,' as if I didn't need dignity myself" (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 200). Rae realizes that Islam offers a space for agency for those who have hitherto been denied one. By converting to Islam, Rae rejects the patriarchal authority previously invested in his Orientalist identity, and embraces a masculinity of the oppressed, of the marginalized. His conversion stands as a rejection of the Orientalist discourse which dominates the East.

Rae's articulation of Islam as a religion of the marginalized echoes a rich theological tradition emphasizing the place of social justice in Islam. Ali Shari'ati, a prominent Iranian scholar deeply influenced by the writings of Franz Fanon, writes:

Islam is the first school of social thought that recognizes the masses as the basis, the fundamental and consensus factor in determining history – not the

elect as Nietzsche thought, not the aristocracy and nobility as Plato claimed, not great personalities as Carlyle and Emerson believed, not those of pure blood as Alexis Carrel imagined, not the priests or the intellectuals, but the masses. (Shari'ati, 1979, p. 49)

Shari'ati argues that Islam privileges the agency of the people as determinants of social change. In contrast to Western traditions which privilege elites, Shari'ati finds in Islam a system of thought which advocates on behalf of those who are marginalized and oppressed.

In a similar critical vein, Asghar Ali Engineer and Farid Esack draw comparisons between (predominantly Latin American) Christian liberation theology and Islam. Drawing upon theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Aloysius Pieris, Engineer (1984) claims, "Liberation theology subordinates institutions evolved in the historical process to a lively sense of living, active God who inspires human beings for passionate but rational pursuit of social justice which is a dominant note of faith" (p. 23). Engineer argues that there is great potential for developing an Islamic theology of liberation. Drawing upon the Qu'ran, he states, "The Meccan verses revealed to the Prophet sharply condemn the practice of accumulation of wealth and warn the Meccan merchants of the dangerous consequences which will follow if they do not spend their wealth in the way of Allah" (p. 25). For Engineer, the Qu'ran is a text which articulates an explicit vision of social justice through the redistribution of wealth and the privileging of the needs of the poor and marginalized. For Esack (1999), a South African Muslim scholar, the "re-examination or reviewing of our faith in personal terms cannot be done in isolation from the struggle against unjust socio-economic systems" (p. 3). Drawing upon his experience of resistance to the oppression of apartheid, Esack emphasizes the role of Islam in fostering socio-political challenges to systemic injustice and inequality. Personal faith cannot be separated from social activism and praxis in the wider community.

The concept of Islam and the sacred which Aboulela articulates in her novel draws upon the traditions of both Islamic liberation theology and Islamic feminism to challenge both Orientalist and patriarchal Islamist notions of religious experience. Ghazoul writes:

The sacred that Aboulela espouses is neither an abstraction, nor a dogma, nor is it empty rituals. Rather, it is the struggle within against the incontinence of desire and the need to grasp the essence of the religious experience. The fiction's voice is unmistakably that of a woman articulating the lived experience and the un-lived dreams of a segment of society that has often been condemned to silence or made to succumb to patriarchy. (Ghazoul, 2001, para. 13)

The notion of the sacred that Sammar embraces is one that allows her to articulate her experience in the world and sustains her agency in the face of hegemonic patriarchal Western and Eastern narratives. This is a notion of the sacred which infuses and complements daily life, marking and making time "for praying and tea" (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 137). It is a notion of the sacred which emphasizes a mindful approach to lived experience. Rae's conversion demonstrates his commitment to

lived experience over abstract textual knowledge, and articulates a version of masculinity which brings a mindful awareness of one's place in the world. His acknowledgement that he too needs the dignity that Islam confers (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 200) emphasizes the way that patriarchal discourses not only suppress women and Others, but also do damage to men in positions of privilege and power.

Aboulela's depiction of Islam as a foundation for social justice writes back to Western imperial discourses which depict Islam as a backward, barbaric religion of extremists and terrorists. Her use of Islam also provides an alternative narrative to those articulations of resistance which appeal to secular or humanist values. Cooke (2000) writes, "Juxtaposing religious observance, however defined, with political activism in the public realm, they [Arab women writers] claim simultaneous and contradictory belongings even as they resist globalization, nationalism, Islamization, and the patriarchal system that pervades them all" (p. 151). Aboulela's narrative articulates a resistance to the patriarchal models offered by both Islamization and Orientalism, while maintaining a liberatory role for Islam. The relationship between Sammar and Rae provides a model for cross-cultural exchange, conversation, love and translation which resists the stagnant binaries of East and West, the residual ideologies of colonialism. Near the end of the novel, Sammar imagines Rae standing on the balcony of his hotel:

The hotel was built by the British in colonial times. It once glittered and ruled. Now it was a crumbling sleepy place, tolerant of rats and with showers that didn't work. But still the view was as before, something natural brimming over, the last stretch of the Blue Nile before it curved and met with the other river, changed color and went north. (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 202)

The image of the crumbling colonial hotel parallels the crumbling edifice of Orientalist representations of masculinity and domination of the Other. These notions are revealed to be no longer sustainable. However, Aboulela, through Sammar, provides us with a hopeful image – the view of the river continuing as before, with "something natural brimming over." The description invites us to read Aboulela's narrative as an attempt to build an alternative in the ruins of colonial discourse, an alternative which remains attentive to the way in which identities and relationships exceed representation and language, always brim over.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The Qudsi Hadiths are texts inspired by Allah, but communicated in the words of Mohammed. The Hadiths are considered supplementary and subordinate to the

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Qur'an, as the Qur'an is both divinely inspired and "is Allah's wording" (Aboulela, 2001b, p. 42).

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