Politics of Identity in Multicultural Settings: a Literary Analysis of Leila Aboulela's Novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*

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April 17, 2009

Aboulela is a Sudanese novelist, who attracted attention and recognition world-wide through her work. She brings east and west together in her novels and highlights the struggle of females being caught in an unfamiliar setting. Her work has been translated into nine languages. Aboulela's first novel, *The Translator* was published in 1999. It was short-listed for the Orange Prize 2000 and also long listed for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards 2001. Abuolela's second novel *Minaret* was published in 2005 and won the Best Novel nominee for the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction. It was long listed for the Orange prize for Fiction and the IMPAC prize.

In both Novels, Aboulela portrays a Sudanese heroine living in a foreign land, London in *Minaret* and Aberdeen in *The Translator*. Aboulela knows a lot about the foreign land that she placed her heroines in because at the age of seventeen she went to London to receive her Masters degree in Statistics from the London School of Economics and then in 1990 Aboulela's husband took a job in Aberdeen. Aboulela wrote most of her work in Aberdeen, she explains the reason behind this: "I needed to express myself. I was 24 years old and stuck in a strange place, with two boisterous little boys, and my husband was working offshore on the oilrigs. It was a life for which I wasn't prepared…There was the Gulf war and a lot in the papers criticizing Islam and it used to hurt me."

The heroines of both novels hold to religion in Multicultural settings. The heroines are displaced in the land that they migrated to. They feel like strangers in an unfamiliar setting where both of them long for their native land, Sudan. As a result

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they both try to take advantage of the Multicultural setting in Aberdeen and London. They go to the mosque and gather with minorities like them to create a sense of home. Thus, Aboulela points out the positive aspects about Multiculturalism such as the existence of mosque and Halal meet stores and as well as the dark sides of Multiculturalism such as hinting at hidden racism and the struggle to belong to the majority culture.

In both Novels, Aboulela describes the journey of female protagonists that gain their strength from their spiritual devotion. Aboulela delivers a clear message to the Western reader which is that Islam enlightens the life of Muslims. Aboulela says: "Islam restrains me, but restraint is not oppression, and boundaries can be comforting and nurturing. Freedom does not necessarily bring happiness, nor does an abundance of choices automatically mean that we will make the right one. I need guidance and wisdom; I need grace and forgiveness." Aboulela says that she does not remember when she learned that God existed just as she does not remember when she learned her name. Her mother and grandmother instilled spiritual knowledge in her by telling her stories from the Qur'an. Aboulela believes that having a religious identity is more stable than having a national identity because she can carry her religion with her anywhere she goes.

In both her novels, Aboulela talks about Islam and its image in the West. She began with herself then her heroines. When the author was in high school, she wanted to wear hijab (Head Cover) but she did not have the courage because she cared about what her friends would think. But when she did, she did it out of choice and not because her husband pressured her or something like that. Thus, hijab for her is a major part of her Islamic identity and is so to her heroines. Aboulela anticipates "in

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time the West will come to look at the veil in a different light. It encourages me when a Western woman comments on my headscarf. I feel that she has reached out to me, she has seen beyond the symbol.”

Most of Aboulela’s work has been done through a Muslim female protagonist. Through her heroine in both novels, Aboulela addresses issues related to feminism where both characters seek to find comfort in unfamiliar setting and have to give up their dependency on men to go on in life. Both novels talk about the struggle of Muslim women in a foreign land, and end with their empowerment through embracing an Islamic identity. Hijab is one of the main symbols of this Islamic identity. Both heroines embrace hijab to become their representation and self protector in what could be sometimes unfriendly setting. Embracing this symbol means fighting against the westerner's perception of hijab. Thus, it is not a barrier to interact with others. Although she poses herself strongly in her work as an Islamic feminist, she hopes in future to do it through a male protagonist. Therefore, her third novel will have five male characters.

In both novels, Abuolela draws attention to the political reflection of post-colonial Sudan and the still persistent dichotomies between East and West. Aboulela reveals the consequences of the British colonialism resulting in a fragmented post-colonial culture that is politically and socially unstable. The people still alternate between love and hatred to the west, as some admire the west while others despise everything western. Some believe in the superiority of the “white” and still view themselves as inferior. Aboulela also points out, that colonialism convinced the natives that they are primitives and uncivilized by referring to them as 'Third World' in comparison to the west where it is modern and civilized. The modern generations

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3 http://www.arabnews.com/?page=7&section=0&article=98991&d=27&m=7&y=200
who are exposed to the West are the best advocates of the superiority of the West as they compare between both settings, emphasizing the advancement and civilization of the West.

The two major cultural settings in both novels are the post-colonial fragmented culture of Sudan and multiculturalism that is experienced in the West (England and Scotland). In both novels the cultural aspects that are presented define the characters and play a major role in their identity formation, and most importantly in their identity crises. Culture determines a person’s affiliation to a certain geographical place, certain traditions and norms, and as well as determine certain behaviors. Culture proved to be a main component of one’s identity and its loss is a reason for one’s identity loss. The definition of culture varies from one place to another. A general definition of culture is "the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving." "Culture is the "mental code" or "mental blueprint" that distinguishes a member of a group from another."

The post-colonial culture of Sudan as depicted in both novels reveals the troubling state of the nation and its people. Post-colonial culture in both novels plays a main role in both shaping and contributing to the main heroines’ sense of alienation and displacement. Many Theorists of Post-colonialism have focused on the social and cultural effect of colonialism. Post-colonialism in literature and arts assumes the following: "Colonial alienation. Colonialism leads to the alienation of the native in

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his own land. This is described as a traumatic experience that erodes the individual’s identity, ambivalence towards authority and cultural relativism which means that the colonialists’ defilement of culture is socially, morally and politically incorrect. The effect of colonialism shows the most on the culture of the ex-colonized nation as been inherited through generations that still suffer from the outcomes of colonialism.

Multiculturalism is often used to refer to cultural diversity which includes (though not restricted to) language, race, ethnic background, country or region of origin, dress, values, religion and associated practices, social and community responsibilities, sexuality, disability, notions of family, family responsibilities and political view. Caleb Rosado defines multiculturalism as:

"a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society."

However recent literature claims that multiculturalism makes people more distinct than they really are and it exaggerates the internal unity as well as the overall difference between cultures. Thus, we can split opinions about Multiculturalism into two: the supporters who believe of its advantages and the critics who are confident that it will damage the society and harm the majority while trying to consider the right of minorities. Both novels reveal the positives as well as negatives of multiculturalism.

The clash between the colonizer and the native culture reflecting the clash between modernity and traditionalism has lead to two clashing responses; segregation or assimilation. Segregation means that people "choose to revive their own culture

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based on their traditions and reject the new culture totally. They tend to trace their origins and past from cultural identity."8 Assimilation means that people "choose to assimilate with the new culture that is based on technological progress and appears to them as a project of modernity. However by doing so… those people abandon their own values and traditions and even sense of belonging to the nation." 9 Thus, the post colonial culture of Sudan as revealed in Minaret (2005) is characterized with admiration of the west, fragmentation of the native culture, creation of a western elite and thus a sub-culture, and political instability. All of these factors contributed to the struggle which the heroine went through in her identity formation.

The post-colonial culture of Sudan is characterized with a certain admiration to the ex-colonizer. The novel covers Sudan in the 1980s, in specific between 1984 and 1985. The colonizers imposed their ideologies and political climate on the natives. Many argue that colonialism did a lot of good to the colonized nations. It brought industrialization, education and advanced life style of the western culture and technology. Others argue that colonialism is immoral and represents pure oppression. Dr. Visam Mansur sums up the impact of colonialism on the socio-cultural stratification of the society by forwarding that: "The emergence of bourgeoisie classes in the colonies, modeling themselves after their masters, who endeavor to maintain their status quo by getting closer to Western culture and the emergence of societies with a lot of contradictions and split loyalties."10 For example in the novel the Sudanese society is divided into classes, the higher the status the more adoption of western norms. Even among regular people anything "western" is admired.

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9 Al-Malki 27.
10 http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Academy/4573/Lectures/postcolonialism.html
Post-independence Sudan, as the novel depicts, is a nation with no unified culture but fragmented one, the culture is a mixture of modern and traditional life styles and ideologies. The very components of the culture in Sudan have been altered due to colonialism and modernity. Thus, religion as well as tradition is undermined by the 'modern' culture. Fashion and style reflects diversity; some wear modestly like village girls while some wear in western style like Najwa. Sudanese elites have different life style compared to some natives who prayed while elites went to clubs. Also, the traditional culture of Sudan that relies on religion has also been affected as religion in Najwa’s life seems to be a trait of the poor whether servants or village girls at school. This indicates a new kind of master/slave relationship and intensifies the gap between the elite and the working class.

The western culture that was dominant during and after colonialism has resulted in the creation of a generation that is detached from their native culture and feels like outsiders. The Sudanese elite follow the western norms by inheriting their language, ideology and traits. This creates a sense of displacement, as they can't align themselves with the natives and instead look at the western culture with admiration and strive to imitate it. A sub culture is created among the western-educated youth and its products are natives with a western view, clashing with their native mentality and views about culture. This western approach gives them a certain privilege and sense of superiority over the natives. Najwa, the heroine, is the daughter of a prominent Sudanese bureaucrat- the advisor of the president- and belongs to an elite that doesn’t only inherit the British rule but also their culture that is perceived as superior. Najwa exposes who she is to the reader when she says, "I was an aristocrat, yes from my mother's side with a long history of acres land and support for the British and hotels in the capital and bank accounts abroad."

is consumed with doing charity work. Her brother, Omar is a western-like who spends most of his time going to parties or watching Top of the Pops. Najwa, like others in her generation, follows western trends; her dreams are shaped by pop songs and American films. Her family resembles the new bureaucrats who are above the masses and are detached from the socio-cultural atmosphere of the natives. Najwa's family takes over the prestige and power of the ex-colonizers and inherits their privileges. Najwa says, "We ate from china and silver. We wiped our mouths with napkins that were washed and ironed everyday."\(^{12}\) The class division plays a major role in defining them as elites. They only mingle with their class, the only exposure they have to the real life of the people is through (master-slave) interactions as in the maids they have and people in need that they help.

As products of dominant and powerful elite, Omar and Najwa inherit the colonizer’s ideology and mentality that have formed their living style and have affected their identity. Dr. Al-Malki argues that "the colonized elites were alienated from their communities' needs and instead of attempting to de-colonize they strengthened the British ideology."\(^{13}\) Both Najwa and Omar spend their early youth in Khartoum cocooned within the circles of the city's Westernized elite. Their father made sure that his kids are getting the best education in the powerful language of the masters'. Altbach points out that "elites have often sent their children to private schools conducted in European language in an effort to maintain their privileged position."\(^{14}\) Najwa's father owns a house in London however his kids know nothing about their own country. Omar believes that colonialism improved Sudan, as Najwa

\(^{12}\) Aboulela, *Minaret* 16.

\(^{13}\) Al-Malki.

reveals when she says "Omar believed we had been better of under the British and it was a shame that they left."

Colonialism has made Sudan a fragmented nation with competing political ideologies which has led to the successive Coup d’êtres. The system is corrupt because after colonialism the rule moved from masters to natives. Bob-Milliar indicates that the "Western democracy during the colonial era was dualistic, selective and very oppressive… Most African leaders choose the socialist path of development with catastrophic results. Most African states had to fight for freedom from people who claimed to be the champions of democracy." Thus, when Sudan got its independence there was no unified vision of rule but clashing ideologies- each seeking power over the interest of the nation. Archie Mafeje points out that:

"The successor to colonialism was not uhuru (freedom in ki-Swahili) but rather neo-colonialism in which the new African leaders were partners, be it very junior ones. This testifies to the inability of the African leaders to cut the umbilical cord from their former colonial masters is evidence of their lack of a viable alternative."

The political atmosphere is the theater on which these conflicting ideologies took place. Anti-government movements have been created, each embracing a different ideology and claiming the best for the post-independent nation. Anwar is one of the active communist in the university; he is a member of the Democratic Front, the students' branch of the Communist Party. Anwar believes that "It was backward to have faith in anything supernatural… [And he] despise[d] those who needed God, needed Paradise and the fear of Hell." To Anwar "The Islamic government in Khartoum was the enemy. He liked to point out its faults and contradictions".

15 Aboulela, Minaret 11-12.
18 Aboulela, Minaret 241.
19 Aboulela, Minaret 159-160
attacks Najwa's father and accuses him of corruption, as he confronts her: "He is taking advantage of his post government, he takes commissions on every deal the government makes with a foreign company." Even after the execution of Najwa's father, the new government turns to be also corrupt. They asked Anwar to spy on the activities of the Communist Party, offered him money and a car and, when he refused, took him away and tortured him by putting his leg in a pail of ice causing him a permanent handicap. Anwar touches on the corruption in the government saying: "That's the tool of torture in the poorest countries in the world… One had to have his leg amputated, others shot, and others didn't have, like [me], a sister in the police to help [them] escape." However Anwar and Najwa end up exiled and envious of other countries that provide their people with safety and security. By the end both governments end with yet another coup leading to the political instability of the nation. When Najwa asks Anwar of the reasons of such instability he refers to history and the era of colonialism when he says "everything was connected to history and economies.”

The clash between modernity and traditionalism in the Sudanese culture has affected Najwa's cultural identity. In Sudan Najwa feels like an outsider, she looks at native people from an outsider's lens. Najwa is aware of the difference, she knows she is a product of English education and belongs to aristocracy which widened the gap between her and her native culture. However, Najwa attempts to hold on to some aspects that she feels is native as a compromise of her lost cultural identity, for example although she doesn’t pray, she insists on fasting Ramadan. She also loves hearing the azan (Call for Prayer); she secretly admires girls who are covered. At the same time, her western orientation and life style make her stand out and be identified

20 Aboulela, Minaret 44.
21 Aboulela, Minaret 162.
22 Aboulela, Minaret 165.
as a westerner in her own culture. Najwa is a hybrid who belongs to two different cultures but can't identify with any. When she is in Sudan, she does not belong to the cultural setting of the natives, because of her father’s political position and her privileged upbringing. Even when in London- she can’t identify herself with the western culture- a culture that can not go beyond her dark skin. Najwa feels that she lost her identity, in Sudan she is an outsider and in London she is an outsider too. She can’t form her own view of what she wants or who she wants to become.

Najwa's loss of identity is mirrored in her incapability of formulating or analyzing her views. She has no cultural stance or political views although her father was a politician, supported by one regime and executed by another. Anwar tells Najwa that she is not an intellectual, as a result she believes him. This shows that Najwa does not have enough confidence to believe in her own abilities. Anwar condemns religion referring to it as backward and responsible for the Sudanese civil war, human rights violations and the suppression of free speech and terrorism. Although Najwa doesn’t agree, she doesn’t voice it. She says that she can’t stand up to Anwar. She thinks of herself: "It wasn't fundamentalists who killed my father; it wasn't fundamentalists who gave my brother drugs. But I could never stand up to Anwar. I did not have the words, the education or the courage.”

Lee Jasper, an equalities advisor to the London Mayor, defines multiculturalism as "government policy that promotes diverse cultures, by honoring religious and ethnic festivals and allowing freedom of speech and religious practice." A recent study by Dr. Ludi from the university of Manchester indicates that the "British society is becoming more mixed, not more segregated, with the

number of mixed neighborhoods increasing from 864 to 1,070 in the decade to 2001. The novel highlights the diversity of the British culture in the United Kingdom, in which the heroine strives to find her lost identity. Multiculturalism in the novel is both a further cause for Najwa’s ambivalence, loss, and finally finding a form of identity to belong to.

In Multicultural London, sub-communities thrive to maintain their identities in different forms. In London, there are mosques and Halal meat stores. In the novel the mosque is the place where people from the same religion gather, regardless of their nationalities. They were established for Muslims living in exile giving them a sense of belonging to higher order. However, these sub-communities have helped in magnifying the difference between them and the dominant British culture. The dark sides of Multiculturalism can’t be ignored. It is a further reason for racism to function. Hatred towards immigrants and the whole issue of the loss of British "identity" have generated skepticism around multiculturalism. People didn't accept their differences, and instead magnifies them to widen the gaps between different cultural groups. For example, Najwa gets harassed by three men who threw juice on her just because she covered her hair.

Najwa living in such multicultural state moves from being totally lost and ambivalent toward finding a form of identity that satisfies her. In 1985 Najwa and her family are exiled to London after taking their father to trial, where she fails to fit herself in the bigger picture. In the introduction the heroine describes the place that she migrated to, London. Najwa only locates herself with certain people; however, she is conscious of the different traits of each season in the London. This is evident in

her description: "London is at its most beautiful in autumn. In summer it is steady and swollen, in winter it is overwhelmed by Christmas lights and in spring, the season of birth, there is always a disappointment."\(^{26}\) The heroine also describes the dynamics of the streets in London in the morning: “Men in suits and young women wearing the latest fashion get into new cars and drive off to good jobs.”\(^{27}\) Najwa is shocked of the heterogeneity of the culture in London. She says that it is hard to guess people's origins indicating that it's a city of many immigrants, who immigrate to it for better opportunities seeking to improve their economic status.

The novel traces Najwa’s life in London from 1985 till 2004. She lives in the city but on the surface like a foreigner for four years, until she finds herself alone in 1989. Her mother dies, her brother goes to jail, and she spends all of her money. It is only when she is forced to live the ordinary daily life that she feels totally lost and begins to feel the need to belong to any form of stable identity. In the first lines of the novel the author gives a glimpse of the protagonist current state: “I’ve come down in the world. I’ve slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn’t much room to move. Most of the time I’m used to it. I accept my sentence made do not brood or look back. But sometimes a shift makes me remember.”\(^{28}\) Najwa’s sense of identity is torn between her past and present. Her life is not steady, it keeps on fluctuating. Both her life in Sudan and London are superficial. The changes she is subjected to are not only in geographical terms but also in the social class. Najwa cannot forget who she was in Sudan; she was a part of a wealthy family, and now is working as a maid in London. Juxtaposing both lives reveals the transformation that the heroine goes through and her losses. She realizes her ambivalent place in a culture that she doesn't belong as she states, "for the first time in my life, I disliked London and envied the

\(^{26}\) Aboulela, *Minaret* 1.  
\(^{27}\) Aboulela, *Minaret* 2.  
\(^{28}\) Aboulela, *Minaret* 1.
English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused. For the first time, I was conscious of my shitty-colored skin next to their placid paleness.\textsuperscript{29}

In London Najwa is lost and alienated, she holds to what seems familiar in an unfamiliar setting. Najwa always looks for someone or a place to rescue her. For example, when Anwar comes to London she holds on to him because he reminds her of Sudan, although he accuses her father of corruption. After being orphaned, Najwa finds solace and companionship within the Muslim community. Thus, she is able to identify herself within a long-existing identity. She searches for a place where she can find comfort and "sense of belonging". The mosque represents that place for her, as she states, "I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents’ room."\textsuperscript{30} When she finally steps into the mosque, "the words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it."\textsuperscript{31} Najwa needs Tamer because he offers her the one thing that she has been craving: "There was a time when I had craved pity, needed it but never got it. And there are nights when I want nothing else but someone to stroke my hair and feel sorry for me."\textsuperscript{32} When Tamer feels sorry for her, she says "I need this from him. It feels right nourishing"\textsuperscript{33}. This indicates that Najwa lacks human relationships, most of the time she feels lonely and alienated. She wants people to feel her pain and look after her by giving her support and all the love that she needs.

What attracted Najwa and Tamer to each other is their sense of loss and their quest for an identity in a foreign setting. Both find their solace in the practices of Islam and in their struggle to maintain it and fight temptations. Adhering the practices

\textsuperscript{29}Aboulela, \textit{Minaret} 174
\textsuperscript{30} Aboulela, \textit{Minaret} 74-75.
\textsuperscript{31} Aboulela, \textit{Minaret} 240.
\textsuperscript{32}Aboulela, \textit{Minaret} 197.
\textsuperscript{33}Aboulela, \textit{Minaret} 117.
of Islam brings to Najwa an identifiable sense of identity, she tells Tamer "I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed. And now, like you I just think of myself as a Muslim." Tamer also views himself as a Muslim when he says "My mother is Egyptian, I've lived everywhere except in Sudan: Oman, Cairo, here [London]. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity" as for his non practicing sister, "she considers herself Arab." Challenges made Najwa hold tighter on her new religious foundation and her adopted religious style. For the first time she stands to what she believes in, regardless of the racist remarks because of her hijab.

The Translator (1999) presents a further dichotomy between the Orient and the Occident, East and West and that is in modern terms the First and Third World countries. The Third World is generally associated with backwardness while the First World is generally associated with advancements. Dr Al-Malki indicates that "Whatever the terms have been coined to describe the non-European, newly independent nation- Third World, Commonwealth, Overseas- they tend to serve the intention of imposing divisions on the basis of regions and nations and, most importantly, on the basis of their 'otherness' and opposition." Many people from the Third-Developing World living in the west make constant comparisons that magnify the divisions between both worlds- in favor of the west. In Aberdeen Yasmeen, a British born and raised Pakistani “had the habit of making general statements starting with 'we', where 'we' meant the whole of the Third

34 Aboulela, Minaret 110
35 Aboulela, Minaret 110.
36 Aboulela, Minaret 110.
37 Al-Malki 12
Sammar looks at her native country from a binary lens as a Third World country in comparison to Aberdeen. In Sudan when Sammar takes Amir (her son) and Dalia (her niece) to her bother's home, she tells them "If we were in Scotland, you would have had to sit in the back and wear seat belts." What Sammar says make no sense to them because they had never seen anyone wearing a seat belt. However in Aberdeen, there are regulations and rules that determine people's behaviors where people highly respect these rules. When Sammar goes with her aunt to visit Tarig's (her husband) grave, Sammar is shocked to see "dirty things on the graves, things that the wind had carried through the barbed-wire fence. Orange peel, an empty cigarette carton, the remnant of a nest." In Aberdeen however Sammar sees "White curved metal, each and every one bore a placard, In Loving Memory of this person or that. As if people must die so that others can sit in the Winter Gardens." In Sudan the electricity goes off most of the time. As a result Sudanese usually curse the government. Rae also notices a big difference when he travels to Sudan. In the airport Rae says: "The conveyer belt wasn't working so it took ages for the luggage to come out" while Sammar describes Aberdeen's airport as being clean and plush. The hotel that Rae is staying at has rats and the shower is not working. Sammar feels embarrassed as she has lived in both places.

Sammar being educated and living in the west is aware of the importance of education in the advancement of nations. She notices that the value of education in Sudan differs from Aberdeen: in Sudan there is a big deficit in education level where in Aberdeen people value education. Sammar says that illiteracy rate in Sudan is 60% or 32% according to who was right. The Sudanese government does not realize that

38 Aboulela Leila, *The Translator* (New York: Black Cat, 1999) 11
39 Aboulela, *The Translator* 145.
40 Aboulela, *The Translator* 185.
education is power and that it should take a great care of it. The 'Erasing literacy' classes that Sammar teaches are in the evening and the syllabus is set by a government commission. Sammar wants to offer to the class a health lesson about breastfeeding; however, because of the shortage of books, children's school books are used. Sammar says “It was humiliating to learn from such books.” Thus, education, especially adult education is not the one that is included among the government priorities. The government does not motivate the students to learn or even to come to school. Sammar points out that the "undergraduate student were not so well dressed or healthy looking as the ones she use to see in Aberdeen.”

The post-colonial culture of Sudan is characterized with a certain admiration to the west. The colonized view themselves as primitives and uncivilized compared to the westerners. This sentiment has been transmitted through generations. Waleed, Sammar's brother, covers his computer with plastic because it is imported from the west. He tells Sammar that she is fortunate because she has a good job and lives in a civilized place. Mahasen accuses Sammar of not working well in Aberdeen and that is the reason she got fired. She tells her: "Foreigners don't stand for nonsense, I know. Their countries wouldn't be so advanced if they did." In Aberdeen, Sammar admires the quality of people and their civilized manners like Rae's civilized relationship with his ex-wife's family. Sammar is also impressed to see polite signs in Aberdeen and people abiding the traffic rules.

Sammar lives in Aberdeen disconnected from her setting, with no sense of who she is or what she wants. The first lines of the novel start with a description of Sammar's dream: "She dreamt that it rained and she could not go out to meet him as planned… She was afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this

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44 Aboulela, *The Translator* 159.
45 Aboulela, *The Translator* 170.
country, afraid of the wind even. At such times she would stay indoors and watch people doing what she couldn't do. These first lines indicate the state of the protagonist. Sammar is a Sudanese widow who is working in Aberdeen as a translator. Wail Hassan describes her life as being "characterized by confinement—within her cold, drab room where she is often trapped by the weather, within her lonely existence that she drowns in sleep; and within memories of the past and dreams for an uncertain future." Aberdeen is dark in winter which makes Sammar more depressed. Sammar’s husband died in a car accident which Sammar blames herself of because she was the one who insisted that he buys a car. She wishes that her son died in the accident instead of her husband because he can be replaced easily.

Sammar is a hybrid who lives in two places, but doesn’t fully belong to either. Sammar has a sense of displacement; she longs to belong to a land to have a sense of belonging as we see her wishing she had been born in Sudan. Sudan is a symbol of belonging and a major component of her identity; she idealizes it and defends it. Thus, Sudan has a special place in her heart while Aberdeen represents the foreign land. This is evident when we are told that, "In better times she used to reinvent the beginning of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan, Africa's largest land, in the Sister's Maternity Hospital, delivered by a nun dressed in white." This contributes to the heroine's loss and self imposed exile in Aberdeen and her displacement in Sudan because although she is Sudanese, she feels that she does not belong to her native land because of the fact that she was born and has lived outside Sudan.

Sammar experiences geographical and emotional exile in Aberdeen. She detaches herself from the world after her husband's death. She leaves Sudan and goes

46 Aboulela, *The Translator* 3.
47 Wail S. Hassan, *Leila Aboulela and the Poetics of the Islamic novel*, P8
48 Aboulela, *The Translator* 5
to Aberdeen without her son to forget Tarig because Sudan reminds her of her husband. This is evident when we are told: "To see again the streets where Tarig had ridden his bike, and she had walked everyday after school him and Hanan… To go to where everything happened, her aunt's house; laughter on their wedding, fire when she brought Tarig's body home." The heroine is emotionally weak. Thus, in Aberdeen the heroine excludes herself from the public. She only knows the people that she works with like Rae and Yasmine and people in her own building. Sammar's room in Aberdeen is like a hospital room, as she does not personalize it to make it home. This shows that Sammar does not feel that Aberdeen is her home instead it is the place where she escapes from reality. Nothing matters to her after her husband's death.

As a woman Sammar was brought up weak and fragile, she feels that she needs a man in her life to make her stronger. She is convinced that she cannot go on without a man. Thus, when Ahmed Yaseen an old man who has two wives proposes to her she agrees. However her aunt Mahasen gets angry because Sammar is an educated woman who can survive in this world without the need of a man especially one who is not educated and married. Tarig her husband was educated, he went to Aberdeen to specialize in medicine. Sammar struggles all through the novel to feel independent and confidence. Wail Hassan says:

"The Translator progresses from disillusionment and despair (after the death of her husband), to helplessness (in the opening paragraph), to misconstrued purpose (her attempt to force Rae to convert so that they could get married), to discovery of true purpose (when she realizes her self-centeredness and prays for his salvation for his own sake, not hers)."

At the end of the novel when Rae asks Sammar to marry him and come live with him in Aberdeen she says: "If I have been someone else, someone strong and independent

49 Aboulela, *The Translator* 33.
50 Wail Hassan, 10.
I would tell you, I don't want to go back with you, I don't want to leave my family, I love my country too much.” This shows that Sammar is weak to make up her own mind and make her own decisions. Her confusion between what she says she wants and what the reader has thought she did is a clear indication of her state of mind and insecurities.

Sammar struggles between being a part of a community as in Sudan and an individual as in Aberdeen. Sudan, Sammar's native country is a collectivist society in comparison to Scotland, the country that Sammar migrated to which is an individualistic society. According to Jeff Laundauer's and Joseph Rowlands's definition:

"Collectivism is a form of anthropomorphism. It attempts to see a group of individuals as having a single identity similar to a person. ... Collectivism demands that the group be more important than the individual. It requires the individual to sacrifice himself for the alleged good of the group... The standard of good is that which benefits the group... if an individual refuses to acknowledge the superiority of his collective, then he is a traitor and is eliminated"52

Thus, in collectivistic societies such as Sudan, whenever a person thinks of doing something he should think of the consequences that may not only affect him but his family and community as well. This is what Sammar is afraid of, she is afraid that her family will consider her a traitor for falling in love with a foreigner without their consensus. In individualistic societies such as Scotland people value their independency. The philosopher and Novelist Ayn Rand defines individualism as the “right to the pursuit of happiness means man's right to live for himself, to choose what constitutes his own, private, personal happiness and to work for its achievement."53
Sammar alternates between both positions causing her to favor the one that she misses. She idealizes each place when she is not in it. For Example when Sammar is in Aberdeen she misses being in Sudan (collectivistic society) and when she goes to Sudan, she keeps on comparing it to Aberdeen (Individualistic society). Sammar misses many collectivistic traits when she migrates to Scotland like eating as one big family with her aunt, brother, nieces, cousin and neighbors. Sammar also misses her typical life; "Housework, in the evening a social life, everyone indoors by the eleven o'clock curfew. Visitors or calling on people to offer condolences when death came, congratulations when a baby came. Welcome to the one who arrived from abroad, goodbye to the one who was going away."54 On the other hand in Khartoum, the heroine misses the traits of an individualistic society like the privacy and the independency that she had in Aberdeen. In Khartoum, there is no privacy at all to the extent that the heroine searches for a private place at home just to read Rae's letter.

Sammar likes Rae not because she is physically attracted to him but because he is the man whom she can relate to because of his knowledge about Islam and the Arab world. Rae specializes in Middle East politics. Rae refers to himself as an Islamic Expert. Many westerners dislike Rae because he criticizes western views. Rae believes that because he is a westerner, he can make objective statements about the politics in the Middle East. He says: "I studied Islam for the politics of the Middle East. I did not study it for myself. I was not searching for something spiritual."55 Rae is neither an agnostic nor an atheist and he views Qur'an as a sacred text, this all gives hope for Sammar that he might be willing to convert. Rae challenges the stereotypical image of an Orientalist. When Yasmine refers to him as an Orientalist, Sammar disagrees as she believes that, "Orientalists were bad people who distorted the image

54 Aboulela, The Translator P157
55 Aboulela, The Translator 128
of the Arab and Islam. Something from school history or literature, she could not remember. Maybe modern Orientalists were different.” Edward Said says

"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.”

Sammar mediates Rae's access to Islamic articles and texts by translating them. According to Lawrence Venuti, "The aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text, often in highly self-conscious projects, where translation serves an appropriation of cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, political.” Both Sammar and Rae use the other as a cultural medium. Sammar learns things from Rae that she never knew about and Rae benefits from her background and translation ability. Sammar's task is not so easy because sometimes the papers that Rae gives her are hand written and she has to figure out what to omit or add to preserve the meaning of the text. Sammar does not only translate for Rae but she is, as the translator, the bridge that connects both cultures.

In Multicultural Aberdeen, sub-communities seek to sustain their native characteristics. In Aberdeen, there are mosques and Halal meat stores. Sammar is also able to find traditional Arabic food in Aberdeen as, “she bought chili sauce and tins of beans, the ingredients written out in Arabic, packed in a warm place on another continent. A packed of mix falafel, made in Alexandria.” In the university that Sammar works in, there is a mosque where Sammar goes to during lunch break to pray. On the door of the mosque there is a note indicating the times of the Islamic

56 Aboulela, The Translator 21-22
59 Aboulela, The Translator 66.
lessons and gatherings. This indicates that minorities try to form a group and gather up to share the characteristic of the group in a setting that belongs to the majority.

The novel points out the importance of being educated about immigrants' responsibilities in Multicultural society. The heroine senses the need for knowing the rules and regulation of the country that she migrates to. Sammar feels as a helpless immigrant and that motivates her to learn more about Scottish laws and regulations. When Sammar goes with Yasmin to the library, Yasmine tells Sammar about the Nigerian women who lived in Aberdeen for seven years with three children without knowing that she was entitled for child's benefits. Rae mentions to Sammar that there are courts that take cultural sensitivity into account.

In Aberdeen Sammar holds on to her religious identity as a Muslim female because it is the only solid and unchangeable factor in her life. She performs the same tasks; she prays, goes to the mosque and fasts in Aberdeen. In Sudan, during prayer time, classes stops for prayer but in Aberdeen this does not exist. When praying in the mosque, Sammar prays with other women instead of praying by herself in Aberdeen. In Sudan Sammar also holds on to her religion and tries to teach it to her son, as religion is the solid thing in her life. Sammar teaches her son to say "Bismellah" before starting to eat.

Religion is more than just a belief for Sammar as it gives her strength in needed times. The heroine says: "Nothing that Allah forbids his servants is good. It will only diminish them, ultimately or soon, in this life or next."

The only comfort that she finds after the death of her husband is when she prays or lists to the *azan*. Even when she is learning how to drive, when she feels that she is going to die, she

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60 Aboulela, *The Translator* 116.
"turn the steering wheel to the left and instinctively go over the shahadah: I bear
witness there is no god but Allah."\(^{61}\)

Aboulela's novels describe the journey of female protagonists that experience
a sense of displacement trying to find who they are in the west. Islam represents the
only comfort for both heroines in their foreign settings. They gain strength when
performing the same religious tasks that they perform in their native land, Sudan. The
multicultural setting in the foreign lands makes it easier for the heroines to feel
connected with other minorities. Aboulela represents Multiculturalism through the
experiences of Muslim female, touching on the positive as well as negative sides. The
author does not emphasize the dark sides of multiculturalism but does not ignore
them, for example she points to issues of racial hatred towards some minorities-
Muslims. She gives an example of what a Muslim woman wearing the *hijab* may
experience. Aboulela hopes that westerners would look beyond the scarf that of those
Muslim women and try to reach out to them.

\(^{61}\)Aboulela, *The Translator* 70
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