CONSTRUCTING PLACES AND IDENTITIES: MIGRATION AND THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN LEILA ABOULELA'S *THE TRANSLATOR* AND *LYRICS ALLEY*

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This paper focuses on the area where postcolonial, translation and migration studies intersect in the functioning and shaping of place, and on the modalities through which a place can be transformed into a fluid *translated* place or a place *in translation*. Migrant identities, arriving and departing, as protagonists in immigrant fictions, may contribute to a mechanism of constant construction and deconstruction of translated places, perceived both as geographical and subjective places. By means of translation, immigrant people define and re-mould their identities and challenge the notion of place and translation itself. Translation gives rise to the physically and ideologically inhabited place, to which distant territories are transposed and where immigrant subjects re-create, reincarnate and transfer places lost to them.

With particular reference to Maria Tymoczko's position with regard to cultural translation (1999), Michel de Certeau's concept of spatial itineraries and practices (1988), Adriana S. Pagano's perspective on fictionalised translations (2002), Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler's speculations on translation as an empowering activity (2002), and to numerous other theorists and scholars such as Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira (1995, 1999), and Cristopher Larkosh (2002), to list but a few, my purpose in this study is to investigate the representation of place by means of translation both as a linguistic and metaphorical practice and as an instrument of cultural transposition. The role of translation in the creation of geographical place and immigrant identity stands out in two of Leila Aboulela's Anglophone-African novels, *The Translator* (1999) and *Lyrics Alley* (2010), in which the concept of place emerges as a physical entity

located in-between translation and migration. The Egyptian-Sudanese novelist offers a literary corpus which is itself implicitly an object of translation, as the fictionalised immigrant experiences are *de facto* translating experiences: in Aboulela's novels, migrant women behave as cultural translators and make use of cultural translation as an expedient for identity construction. This, in particular, makes *Lyrics Alley* and *The Translator* "metatext[s] of culture itself" (Tymoczko, 1999: 21) through procedures of transportation and relocation of cultural items.

It is now acknowledged that domestication refers to "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, [and brings] the author back home," while the process of foreignisation is "an ethnodeviant pressure on those (cultural) values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad" (Venuti 1995: 20). In other words:

> domestication designates the type of translation in which a transparent, fluent style is adopted to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers, while foreignisation means a target text is produced which deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original. (Shuttleworth and Cowie, 1997: 59)

In *Lyrics Alley*, the Arab Egyptian space is transposed and relocated into a Sudanese space, whereas in *The Translator*, the Sudanese space is transposed and relocated into a Scottish place through a technique of metaphorical translation. The Sudanese and Scottish territories—symbolically referring to Africa and Europe respectively—are practically devoured by the Egyptian and Sudanese cultures, transformed into non-locations at the target level and into material places at the level of the source culture. This particular process of foreignising, in which a source country paradoxically "domesticates" a target one, to use Venuti's antithetical concepts of foreignising and domestication (1995), gives rise to a resurrection of the Egyptian space in Sudan and of the Sudanese space in Scotland. The foreign culture lives within the target context by means of revitalization of "a material culture, a social system and legal framework, a history", to borrow Tymoczko's phrase (1999: 20). Like a traveller, a postcolonial or minority-culture author, Aboulela acts as a foreignising translator who "chooses which cultural elements to attempt to transpose to the receiving audience" and which "linguistic features related to the source culture (such as dialect or unfamiliar lexical items) can be highlighted as defamiliarized elements in the text" (Tymoczko, 1999: 21).

Theoretical framework

Most postcolonial and translation theory examines problems and situations inside and outside Europe by deconstructing the colonial

discourse and allowing for various central and alternative categories to exist simultaneously. In the field of translation studies, the scrutiny of fiction as a source for translation theorisation was one of the main contributions to translation theory in the 1990s. This shift moved translation studies towards the fictional field, what was referred to as the "fictional turn" in translation studies (Vieira, 1995: 51). This shift in the discipline was perceived as the signal which demonstrated how translation and other hermeneutic mechanisms involved fiction and the narrative dimension (Vieira, 1995). The fictional turn in translation studies thus entails three essential elements : fiction, theory and translation. Both theorists and novelists make translation an instrument of fiction, they fictionalise translation and make it "a theme for expressing new configurations of cultural space" (Simon, 1992: 173). Nicole Brossard provides a significant example through her *Mauve Desert* (1990), a novel in which the writer uses translation to reflect on the situation of displacement that is implicit in the state of in-betweenness of female identities, translators, and migrant subjects. Original literary works are subsequently often followed by their translations, which allow the reader to shift continually from text to translation, from one language and culture to another. The gap between an original and its translation is bridged through the presence of a place, which is considered another place, and that of a text, which is regarded as another text. From Brossard's perspective, these permanent shifts – which represent transitional movements – are acts of reading that involve the processes of translation, interpretation, and the writing of stories.

The approach to fiction as a source of translation and theorisation is common to a number of scholars, novelists, and theorists who thematise translation as well as the role of translators. From another theoretical perspective, Vieira (1995) investigates works by Mário de Andrade and Gabriel García Márquez, speculating on the site of translation in Latin American postmodernity and focusing on alternative practices that challenge the notions of invisibility and inequality in the translating mechanism. Drawing on the literary works of writers and translators in twentieth-century Argentina, Cristopher Larkosh (2002) theorises on translation, migration, and sexuality, and re-reads history from the perspective of in-between places that form marginal cultural identities. Adriana S. Pagano (2002), in particular, sites herself within the movement that sees fiction as a source for translation theory by focusing her attention on the relationship between translation, history and fiction in the work of Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar.

Translation thus becomes a new activity that emerges not in a neutral and ideal location, but in real social and political contexts. This permits us to look at translation as a form of power navigating across linguistic and cultural boundaries and not simply as a faithful reproduction of a text. On the contrary, translation involves concrete acts of selection, construction, and omission. As an empowering activity, translation is introduced into literary

works by immigrant writers in order to re-evoke forgotten or hidden places. This procedure somehow echoes Walter Benjamin's idea of translation as an instrument of "eternal afterlife" (1992: 73), challenging death itself by allowing originals to cross over a mechanism which might feasibly be considered a literary reincarnation. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), an analogous concept is emphasised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who present the translator as a creator who can communicate with the spirits of the dead *via* the text.

In Aboulela's works, Sudan, Egypt and Scotland become geographical settings of postcolonial communities, which are strategically translated by specific female characters: the Sudanese Sammar, the protagonist in *The Translator*, and the Egyptian Nabilah, among the female protagonists in *Lyrics Alley*, translate their own spaces within Scotland and Sudan respectively. Sammar transfers her Karthoum from Sudan to England, whereas Nabilah, though African and Muslim, shifts her Egypt to a Sudan that she finds alien and foreign. Cultural translation as a form of cultural transfer and transposition thus represents the instrument through which Sammar and Nabilah as immigrant women create their imaginary world as a place in a hosting space, which is transformed, in turn, into a cultural non-location, where individuals – native and immigrant – are not connected in a uniform manner, and where no organic social life is therefore possible. In this way, the immigrant female characters reconstruct their lives in spaces evoked by Marc Augé as "non-places" (1995), which are perceived as contradictory and incoherent. Whereas the translation of place in *The Translator* involves crossing continents – from Scotland to Sudan and vice versa –, the translation of place in *Lyrics Alley* entails different geographical realities which, however, are part of the same continent and extend from Egypt to Sudan. The crossing of borders is rendered in written language whilst translation creates spatial entities. Sammar and Nabilah transfer their historical places of cultural, linguistic and historical identity into foreign places which are then transformed into transcultural spaces. Sammar's historical Sudan is transposed into a Scottish space where Arabian culture is uncommon or even non-existent, whereas Nabilah's historical Egypt is transferred to a Sudanese space which considers its Egyptian neighbour in terms of rivalry and opposition. In *The Translator* and *Lyrics Alley*, the process of moving from one place to another and the consequences brought about by the move are central to the representation of spacial itineraries, where space itself is somehow the expedient through which the experience of migration and the practice of translation are narrated.

Aboulela deals with space by describing it in a complex and fluid way – often breaking off contacts with real life and recounting experiences and sensations through imaginary spaces or along hallucinatory pathways. Hers are works based on the articulation of movement and space – a form of movement producing space. In *The Translator* and *Lyrics Alley,* Sammar's and Nabilah's migrant existences are literally re-placed and exposed to physical and spatial

dislocation. Both migrant female lives – albeit diverse in many respects – recreate their native spaces through procedures of cultural translation seen in terms of transposition of local cultures to foreign ones. Sammar's and Nabilah's spaces are transformed into material places created by their hallucinations, dreams, and regrets. Both Sammar and Nabilah literally transfer their native spaces – including material culture – to their adopted places. Sammar substitutes Scotland for Sudan and eventually converts her beloved Rae Isles to Islam, while Nabilah physically and symbolically transfers her Egypt to Sudan, even though, in the end, her choice is to go back to Egypt and re-occupy her native space. The occupation of new spaces as a translation practice involving a process of recreation of one's own identity in alien territories brings to mind the translation theory of Haroldo de Campos, which is examined by Vieira (1999). As the Brazilian critic points out, de Campos' interesting metaphors see translating as a form of blood transfusion and vampirization, which may nourish the translator and thus subvert the hierarchic polarities of the privileged original and inauthentic translation in post-colonial contexts; this type of approach to translation can justify the ways in which Sammar and Nabilah devour the Other, imposing their own identities.

By investigating space from a theoretical perspective – with particular reference to the fields of anthropology, philosophy and literary studies, cultural memory studies and postcolonial studies –, we can see how these areas overlap at some point and foreground the concept of space. These theoretical fields seem to share the idea that space needs both a physically present place and a language in which the meaning attributed to space is formulated and passed on. Sammar's and Nabilah's memories, desires and experiences are imposed within a new physical space, which, from Maurice Halbwachs' perspective (1950), is necessary in order for memory to take form. De Certeau's distinction between place and space sees the latter as the form that place acquires at the moment when a meaning is given to it by a person or a community of people. This is what happens to the creations of Sammar and Nabilah, whose stories, in the wake of de Certeau (1988: 115), have the capacity to literally act as metaphors. As such, stories help create, maintain and change the spaces involved by giving them a place within linguistic realities. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard makes it apparent that space, whether physical or narrated, acquires meaning through processes of imagination and narration, and thus exists partially through the narration of its imaginary or virtual, non-physical aspect. Sammar's and Nabilah's narrative spaces seem to be the same as those to which de Certeau refers as structured spaces and functioning as "means of transportation" (1988 : 115) and also of translation. Sammar's and Nabilah's written stories are built up around places and the relationships between these places and their narratives; these also foreground their own textuality and present the texts as virtual spaces in which other existing places are welcomed. Aboulela uses space in order to translate the

experience of migration into written language; the spaces themselves form a frame, giving significance to the memories underlying tales of migration, while creating new spaces or putting existing spaces to a different use, re-negotiating borders and re-interpreting spaces – which appear not as fixed and stable notions, but variable concepts that are liable to change. As a concept space involves a set of meanings and values that are offered to a particular place – and this place becomes the physical area to which the space refers. Spaces are thus produced whenever a place is thought or talked about, when the meaning, given to a place, transforms places into spaces. In de Certeau's terms, stories as "spatial trajectories" (1988: 115) help create and maintain the spaces involved by giving them a place within linguistic realities: "sayings and stories . . . organize places through the displacements they 'describe'" (de Certeau 1988: 116).

Lyrics Alley and *The Translator*

The daughter of a Sudanese man and an Egyptian woman, Aboulela was born in Cairo in 1964 but grew up in Khartoum, which she left in 1987. In 1990, she moved to Scotland with her family, where she worked at Aberdeen College and Aberdeen University. Writing has become her principal activity since 1992. Aboulela's first novel, *The Translator*, is about the identity conflict and culture shock to which an immigrant Muslim woman is subjected as a result of her shift from Sudanese Khartoum to Scottish Aberdeen. Sammar, the protagonist, is thus represented as an immigrant subject dreaming about her return home. She is a young Sudanese widow who works as an Arabic translator at the University of Aberdeen. Away from her home city of Khartoum, alone with memories of her dead husband Tarig and her estranged son, who lives with her aunt and mother-in-law in Sudan, Sammar lives a sad and lonely life, longing for the smells and colours of her country. Solace arrives in her life when she falls in love with Rae, an Orientalist teaching in the same department as Sammar. Rae is Sammar's antithesis: he is Scottish, twice divorced and, though he is interested in Islam, he is an agnostic. When Sammar realises that there is no future for them unless Rae converts to Islam, she starts wishing and praying he will convert. The two characters are separated for a while when Sammar goes back to Sudan and, when they meet again, they understand each other better. *The Translator*, set in two contrasting cities, Aberdeen and Khartoum, both reflect the states of mind of the main character: the cold of the Scottish city makes Sammar feel lethargic inside, whilst the hot climate in Sudan makes Sammar feel alive.

Set in 1950s pre-independence Sudan, *Lyrics Alley* tells the tragic story of Nur, the handsome heir to the Abuzeid family's prosperous trading business, who plunges from a sea-side cliff in Alexandria, smashing several vertebrae in his back and thus shattering any hopes of higher education in Britain, a

good subsequent job and an idyllic marriage to his beloved cousin, Soraya. She is the daughter of Idris Abuzeid, Nur's uneducated uncle and younger brother of Mahmoud, a widower with three daughters. Mahmoud, on the other hand, has two wives: Waheeba, the Sudanese mother of Nur and Nassir, and Nabilah, the Egyptian mother of Ferial and Farouk. The actions and settings in *Lyrics Alley* move from Umdurman, where there are still reverberations of the Mahdist War – also called the Anglo-Sudan War (1881-1899), to Khartoum, a Muslim city, where churches are more numerous than mosques; from cosmopolitan Alexandria to a Cairo where women are more elegant and independent than those living in Sudan. There is also a hospital trip to a technologically advanced but devastated London, following Nur's unexpected accident. Two important divorces, Egypt's from the Sudan and Britain's from Egypt, provide the backdrop to the story of the Abuzeid family politics in a period, during the Second World War, when the Free Officers in Egypt were engaged in revolution and the Sudan was on the brink of independence from Britain. *Lyrics Alley* ends with the presage of a future Sudanese independence. This historical framework underpins *Lyrics Alley* and encourages Aboulela to go back to Khartoum after seventeen years of absence, and try to imagine the pre-independence Sudan of her father's youth.

In *Lyrics Alley,* the construction of space is a component of the Egyptian identity of Nabilah, which recalls Edward Said's concept of the spatial metaphor as a vehicle for the fabrication of identity. In *The Translator,* the Sudanese identity of Sammar, poised between British and Islamic culture, transports the Muslim world, language and knowledge to the West, along with Eastern suitcases, boxes, recipes, and accents. The space to which Sammar's and Nabilah's immigrant experiences are transferred gradually becomes a symbolized, inhabited place; everyday practices rebuild relations into repeated symbolic events, shared memories and co-created myths.

Lyrics Alley differs from *The Translator* in several aspects. In *Lyrics Alley* the characters migrate from one place to another, from one country to another, and their transitory movements also take place in their imagination and turn their travelling experiences into fluid mechanisms. African places during the periods of British domination live on in the protagonists' minds and their physical descriptions are the result of memories or material experiences. The travel context is reinforced through the language of the five senses, which works on at least two levels: the depiction of geographical places (Khartoum, Umdurman, Cairo, London) and the description of sensations (smells, tastes, sounds). The areas appearing in the narration are the hot countries of Egypt and Sudan: an urban, modern, and aristocratic Egypt, and a rural, pre-modern, and humble Sudan. The five senses as natural expedients for the depiction of a place, as Michael Cronin points out, highlight the "complexity of human language and culture" (2000: 88) and represent a sort of "semiotic transcendence, where all the senses other than language are brought to bear

on a travel experience" (Cronin, 2000: 89). The third territory appearing in the text is a London viewed as a place of culture and education, progress and business but rather insignificant in terms of nature, landscape, myths, and traditions. As in *The Translator,* where the Muslim female protagonist is depicted as a travelling character crossing two diverse continents – from Africa to Europe and vice versa, from Sudan to Scotland and back –, *Lyrics Alley* is also concerned with travel as a nostalgic movement from Sudan to Egypt, from Africa to Europe – in particular to London. In contrast to *The Translator*, where the pointed difference between Scotland and Sudan is the result of a culture shock stemming from Sammar's migratory experience and of a state of disorientation caused by Sammar's grief due to the loss of her husband, cultural diversities in *Lyrics Alley* are not between distant locations, but between places within the same African space under British domination. The travel experience is described through the narration of stories about people from Sudan and Egypt; the material culture is observed from the perspective of numerous characters who, like authentic travellers, know the places visited and familiarise the reader with the local climate, customs, languages and dialects, beliefs, and ancient myths, through a process of cultural translation. Translation, as Susan Bassnett remarks, becomes "an exciting journey," for it is "about wanting to cross boundaries and enter into new territory" (1997: 11).

Through a process of translation of her metropolitan Egyptian customs and beliefs, Nabilah moves to the land of her husband and comes to symbolise the urbane, Westernized, future Sudan. Sudan and Egypt represent a dual vision of Africa: two locations, geographically belonging to the same continent but enormously distant in terms of culture, language, elegance, and landscape. Indeed, the constant and dominant clash in *Lyrics Alley* is not between Sudan and the British Empire, but rather between Sudan and Egypt, between Sudanese and Egyptian women. The naturalistic tension between Sudanese spaces and Egyptian places emerges through the translation of material culture, as in the representation of Waheeba and Nabilah's *hoash*:

> The wide, open-air hoash was lined with beds, little stools and tables. It was a massive kitchen, sitting room and bedroom in which women, servants and children cooked, slept, ate and socialised. […] Large round trays were laid out, ready to be filled and sent to the men. The delicious smell of sausage mixed with the tart smell of fried fish […] little dishes of pickles, white cheese, boiled eggs, and red chilli mixed with lemon juice, salt and cumin. (Aboulela, 2010: 17)

In contrast to Waheeba's *hoash,* the immigrant Nabilah, a displaced woman who had married a local man,

> […] had, with her husband's full approval and generous finances, designed her wing in the saraya like a modern, Egyptian home, not

> a Sudanese one. Instead of a hoash, there was a shaded terrace with a wicker table and chairs where, in winter, she could sit and enjoy her afternoon tea […]. Instead of the traditional beds lining the four walls of the sitting room, she had spacious armchairs, a settee, and, in pride of place, her gramophone. It was a proper room, a room to be proud of. Guests reclining and sitting on beds, angharaibs made of rope being the only furniture in a room, the intimacy and privacy of a bed laid out for public eyes and use—was something that particularly infuriated her. It was, she believed, a sign of primitiveness, proof that the Sudanese had a long way to go. Meals too, in Nabilah's quarters, were served in the dining room, around a proper dining table, with knives, forks, and serviettes, not clusters of people gathering with extended fingers around a large round tray, while sitting on those very same beds she had so many objections to. (Aboulela, 2010: 24-5)

This most passionate rivalry as seen through material objects is also perceived and powerfully marked through the representation of external facts, natural and physical beauties which transfer the Egyptian space into a Sudanese one. In Sudan "the warm air carried the repetitive croaking of frogs" and "the scents of jasmine and dust" were coloured by the "blur of stars and clouds" (Aboulela, 2010: 1). In Nabilah's view, Sudan is a distant place, appealing to the European traveller because of its natural savageness: "the Sudan was like the bottom of the sea, an exotic wilderness, soporific and away from the momentum of history. It was amazing but constricting, threatening" (Aboulela, 2010: 24). Her usual imaginary journeys back to Cairo recapture her civilised everyday life in Cairo, a life of fresh air and energy. Nabilah never stops marking her own territory, though she persistently feels as if she is in exile, far away from Cairo, living on the edge, for "the Sudan was like a province of Egypt," not a "metropolitan centre" (Aboulela, 2010: 37-8).

The conflictual relationship between African spaces – Sudanese places and translated Egyptian places in Sudanese spaces – never abates in the text. Nabilah exacerbates the geographical and cultural distance between her husband's native country, Sudan, and hers: "In Cairo, the nights were alive with pleasures of leisurely walks, roasted peanuts and grilled corn, people chatting and shops that stayed open late – the liveliness and light of it all" (Aboulela, 2010: 30). In the Sudanese city where she lives, "the heavy indigo sky was bearing down, the stars mysterious, and the clouds unnaturally large. […] she could hear frogs croaking and the hiss and the breath of night creatures, as if this were a jungle. They prayed Isha and slept as if this was the countryside not a city" (Aboulela 2010: 30-1).

Sudan and Egypt, like two antagonistic women, inhabit Aboulela's narrative texture and personify a metaphorical translator – an *insider* and *outsider* translator – who transports his/her listener-reader across colonised

African countries, depicting them in antithetical terms: civilized/primitive, sophisticated/barbarous, metropolitan/rural, emancipated/restricted, educated/uncultivated. The "very air and texture of Sudan itself" (Aboulela, 2010: 60) makes the African location

> a place where reality was slippery and fantasy could take over the mind, a place of wayward spirituality, a place where the impossible and the romantic pulsed within reach. A place where intangible, inhuman forces still prevailed, not yet tamed and restrained by the rules of religion and men. (Aboulela, 2010: 60-1)

Egypt is, on the contrary, a place of ecstasy, where people wake up late "to the sound of the waves, and the aromas of a heavy breakfast" (Aboulela, 2010: 69). Alexandria is an international city where people pass and leave "bits of their conversations; words in Greek and Arabic, French and English" (Aboulela, 2010: 69). This is what Nabilah misses: the internationality of her country. In contrast, she is tired of

> [her] African adventure, of being there while thinking of here, of being here and knowing it was temporary; enough of the dust, the squalor and the stupidity. Enough of buildings that were too low, gardens that were too lush and skies that were too close. Enough […] of money without culture, prestige among the primitive. (Aboulela, 2010: 84)

Nabilah is Egyptian and wants to move back to Cairo, where she can go back to her previous life, for in "Umdurman, her clothes highlighted her position as an outsider, and Khartoum high society was too competitive and capricious to ever voice its admiration" (Aboulela 2010: 95).

The Translator provides the reader not simply with African landscapes, but also presents geographical depictions of Europe: the Scottish climate and material culture appear in contrast to those in Sudan. African spaces are not opposed to each other, whereas African and European spaces diverge in terms of culture, geography, and language. The Sudanese protagonist in *The Translator*, Sammar, has an excellent knowledge of English, and Rae Isles, an academic expert in Islamic studies, offers her a job as a translator from Arabic into English. In her English translations – which never obscure the meaning of the Arabic words – Sammar opts for fidelity to her source culture to reinforce the difference between home and host country. When she leaves Scotland to go back to Khartoum, "she [finds] herself nostalgic for her old job, the work itself, moulding Arabic into English, trying to be transparent like a pane of glass not obscuring the meaning of any word" (Aboulela, 1999: 150). She is condemned by her native country to spend the first seven years of her life in England, awaiting that moment which might take her back to the country to which she really belongs: "In better times she used to reinvent the beginnings of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan, Africa's largest

land" (Aboulela, 1999: 4). England has always been a distant place to her ever since she was very young; as a mature woman she sees Aberdeen as an alien place, whereas Sudan has always been her place, her familiar place, both physical and mental, since she was a child. Even when Rae, with whom she falls in love, asks her to marry him and move to Aberdeen, she feels as if she were entering a void, an untranslatable dimension. Her departure from Africa brings on nostalgia and moments of regret: "Clear to Sammar that she was going to leave Khartoum and go back with him to Aberdeen. […] She was going to take Amir away from his cousins, his grandmother, his house. […] And she was going to leave this city, its dusty wind and smell" (Aboulela, 1999: 178). Sammar's dilemma is her inability to find a cultural dimension at a target level, and she solves it by metaphorically transposing her native world into the host country, by converting her Scottish lover to Islam, and by using translation as a linguistic and cultural instrument, maintaining the foreignness of the Islamic texts that she translates from Arabic into English. When she goes back to Khartoum, she regains her ability to translate; she speaks English again, when Rae converts to Islam and asks her to marry him. All the material objects left stored away would see the light of day following the news of Rae's conversion; this persuades Sammar that her Muslim world, which is culturally both material and ideological, can actually be translated. In Scotland, she realises how different her country is from her adopted one, "the weather, the culture, modernity, the language, the silence of the *muezzin*" (Aboulela, 1999: 39), whereas Rae's Muslim beliefs confirm the fact that translation, in terms of communication between Africa and Europe, is possible:

> [She] unzipped the suitcase and looked at her winter clothes. She unfolded wool and out came the smell of winter and European clouds. […] Her henna-coloured duffle coat, its silky lining. She would wear it again when she went back to Aberdeen, the toggles instead of buttons […] She ran her fingers over a scarf that was too warm for wearing in Khartoum, its pattern of brown leaves. (Aboulela, 1999: 173-4)

Her first attempt to reconcile her African and European worlds takes place when she becomes fully aware of being attracted to Rae. In a wonderful day-dream, Britain has been transformed into her native place:

> Outside, Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just for her. She saw the sky cloudless with too many stars, imagined the night warm, warmer than indoors. She smelled dust and heard the barking of stray dogs among the street's rubble and pot-holes. A bicycle bell tinkled, frog croaked, the muezzin coughed into the microphone and began the azan for the Isha prayer. But this was Scotland and the reality left her dulled, unsure of herself. […] Sometimes the shadows in a dark room would remind

> her of the power cuts at home or she would mistake the gurgle of the central-heating pipes for a distant azan. But she had never stepped into a vision before, home had never come here before. (Aboulela, 1999: 19)

This metamorphosis – the transformation of Scotland into Sudan – is only present at the level of Sammar's imagination, which reinforces the idea that the protagonist has to deal with both alien and familiar places. Aboulela's novel itself represents an act of translation, a strategic mechanism of translation, linguistically and metaphorically speaking. In a linguistic sense, Sammar translates from Arabic into English but she also translates within the English language in "strange, hostile climates and settings" (Cooper, 2006: 324). In a metaphorical sense, Sammar shifts the Islamic world to the Western Christian universe through hallucinations and the language of the senses, in which sounds, smells and sights evoke the protagonist's warm days in Khartoum. She executes an inner translation, which is always moving around her mind through her recollections. Her need to transfer the hot and dusty African days to Scotland derives from the terrifying feelings that the Scottish weather provokes in her, sentiments of loneliness and a sad sensation of fear: Sammar is "afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which [comes] to this country, afraid of the wind even" (Aboulela, 1999: 3), suggesting that the cold weather stands in stark contrast to the warmer climate of her country of origin. The antithesis between Sammar's life in Africa and that in Scotland is built around the depiction of two antipodal types of climate. Her life in Khartoum is represented as "the dust storms that [approach] rosy brown from the sky, the rush to slam shut windows and doors, the wind whistling through bushes and trees. Brief mad storms and then the sand, thick sand covering everything, whirls of soft sand on the tiles to scoop up and throw away" (Aboulela, 1999: 144). The warmth of her Sudan is transformed into heavy rain in Scotland: "The sound of running water was the rain against the glass. It was like the rain of her dream, her first dream of the present, the first time this grey landscape had found a place in her sleeping mind. Four years and her soul had dived into the past, nothing in the present could touch it" (Aboulela, 1999: 26).

Sammar's practice of translation is not only limited to the faithful rendering of written texts and to the metaphorical transposition of a foreign place into a host space. It also extends to the transferring of material things from her native culture to the culture of the adopted country. This occurs when she cooks for Rae, as she loves preparing native dishes for him and scouring Scottish supermarkets for the right ingredients:

> She made soup for him. She cut up courgettes, celery and onions. Her feelings were in the soup. The froth that rose to the surface of the water when she boiled the chicken, the softened, shapeless tomatoes. Pasta shaped into the smallest stars. Spice that she had to search for, the name unknown in English, not on any of the Arabic-English dictionaries she

> had. *Habbahan, habbahan*. She must walk around the supermarket, frantically searching for something she could not ask about, and she was a translator, she should know. *Habbahan*. Without it, the soup would not taste right, would not be complete. At last, she found the *habbahan*. It existed, it had a name: whole green cardamom. (Aboulela, 1999: 86)

From Sammar's point of view, she is making her beloved one familiar with her traditional food and also demonstrating how her efforts at translating have been used in order to familiarise a foreign country with native dishes. The foreignness of a material object – an Arabian-African dish – is implicitly imposed upon the Scottish target culture to emphasise how the English language operates in understanding two different worlds.

Lyrics Alley and *The Translator* appear to be encapsulated within the practice of cultural translation through which cultural and linguistic transfers take place from the Arab to British language and culture. Arab culture emerges in the language of the coloniser, and imposes itself by re-territorializing itself within the confines of a European linguistic code (Tymoczko, 1999). The African novels reformulate African identity and translate the socio-cultural African world into the awareness of a European language, which permits Aboulela to carve out her own identity and find her voice in a globalised literary system, which might tend to exclude her. As both geographical and mental place, Sudan becomes what Mary Louise Pratt defines as a "contact zone" (1992) between Egyptian and English places.

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