

## Paradoxical Influences on Diaspora Identities: A Critical Analysis of Identities in Season of Migration to the North and The Translator

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### Abstract

This paper proposes that the impact on diaspora identities is not the same. It depends on what kind of influences effect on immigrants such as reasons of immigration, similarities and dissimilarities between the two cultures and most of all the readiness of a diaspora to change his thoughts and traditions plays a great role in the degree of influences that take place. This paper makes a post-colonial investigation of the paradoxical identities that appear in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (2001) and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969). It debunks the dissimilar diasporic attitudes of two Sudanese writers who are both immigrants and the way they use different means of resistance and different kinds of topics in relation to identity crisis.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, immigration, identity, paradox, authenticity, purity, mimicry, crisis, hybridity, religion

### Introduction

Being ready for change makes it easier for a diaspora to cope with the new changes that happen because of the conscious and unconscious hybridizing process on identity formation in the host land. Cultural influences take place in an immigrant's identity whether one accepts it or not. However, the readiness of change helps the diaspora find a way of mimicry of the host culture to become similar but never identical to the identity of citizens in the host land. This also depends on the reasons of immigration and of the sense of belonging and nationalism to one's homeland. The attitude of those who immigrate because of war, poverty or a search for work abroad differs from people who immigrate because being forcedly dismissed from their lands. The second type show a great readiness for

being indulged in the host culture and mostly they try to have all the characteristics of the host culture as a kind of avenger towards certain things in their home land like societal norms, rulers and so on. This of course is not fixed because even some of the first type admire the host culture and become critics of their native societal norms looking at their native society from a vantage position. In Fact, this is an unconscious process and cannot be overgeneralized because we deal with different psychologies rather than a homogenous entity that cannot surely share the same reasons of immigration and have the same personal inclinations.

Correspondingly, the ambivalent attitude of the diaspora communities and diaspora identities is problematic because, as already said, we cannot overgeneralize certain

reasons for all immigrants. This paper debates this ambivalent attitude in two famous diaspora works : Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (2001) and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), and it uses the post-colonial theory and psychoanalysis in its analysis as these two novels are parts of diaspora literature and post-colonial works as well. Diaspora literature should not be dealt with away from post-colonial theory because of the great focus on identity that postcolonial theorists target in their debates.

#### Hybridity and Cultural Contamination in *Season of Migration to the North*

Dealing with *Season of Migration to the North* as a relator work makes us shed light on the notions of 'purity and hybridity' as crucial components in post-colonial and diaspora studies. Undeniably, the concepts of hybridity/contamination and identity/purity are to be amongst the major points that the text makes reference to. Salih's distinction of the 'Self and the Other' urges him to reinforce his ties with his cultural roots. The text contains many instances that reflect the author's clinging to his pure Arab identity. For instance, writing the text into Arabic language is a crucial sign of preserving his identity belonging. Though he masters the English language, Salih's use of his mother tongue does serve various cultural dimensions which centre at the level of answering back to the Western misconceptions of Arab's intellect and identity. Besides, the use of the subject "I" also proves to stand for the writer's preservation of his identity as well as it works as an invitation to the West that the East can write, talk and defend itself against in spite of the fact that Saleh's identity

becomes ambivalent specially when he talks about his native culture in Sudan.

More significantly, very early in the novel the narrator makes an explicit declaration of his belonging to the East. He openly says, "I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose." (2). Nonetheless, the narrator's linking to his native identity does not last for long. His inclination to the Western culture gives rise to the emergence of hybridity and cultural contamination.

In fact, the concept of hybridity in *Season of Migration to the North* does apply to Homie Bhabha's insightful analysis of the ways in which hybridity is an outcome as well as a response to the colonial hegemonic assumptions by the once perceived weak colonized subject. Accordingly, Salih's portrayal of Mustafa Sa'eed may well fit into Bhabha's analysis of hybridity and mimicry. Thus, Mustafa Sa'eed as "a mixed figure implicitly rejects the passivity implied by the previously accepted notion of colonial "assumption"" (Patrica : 130). He is no longer seen in terms of powerless, silence and motionless, but rather proves to be able enough to deconstruct the British colonial ideals about his people and country. This is then how a post-colonial hybrid may function in terms of Bhabha's analysis of hybridity. At first it seems just a matter of mimicry that the protagonist uses to be like 'the self' or rather the 'centre' as a means of resistance. Mustafa's mission in the novel is to adopt the colonizers' language and culture through which he can enter upon the circle of the colonizer, destabilizes it and reverses the roles of the colonizer and the colonized.

Thus, Mustafa's words "I have come to you as a conqueror" (60) may well evoke the cultural and colonial contagion that affects his own personality.

Mustafa Sa'eed, therefore, adopts an alien culture which is far away from his own. His murderous act in London is the result of a hybridized identity he assumes as a post-colonial subject seeking to redefine himself and find a way to avenge from the Western colonizer. Thus, his wearing of the colonizer's mask is to be understood as a renewing of the Self which inevitably leads to hybridity and the destabilization of the self identity.

Another major sign of Mustafa's Western cultural contamination may explicitly lay in his sexual distortion of Western women. Saleh's thought of sexualizing the West is clear in the sexual behaviour of his protagonist. Such corrupted behaviour is in fact a colonial contagious disease that pushes Mustafa to adopt an alien and brutal ways of thinking. His killing of British girls is seen by his lawyer as a product of colonial contagion. He says "these girls were not killed by Mustafa Sa'eed but the germ of a deadly disease that assailed them a thousand years ago" (33). Western colonization was not innocent when dealing with colonized women in Africa or any other colonized lands. Sexualizing Eastern women has always been a disgusting means that makes the stereotype of feminizing the whole east. The writer's awareness of such experiences leads him to reverse the roles of the colonizer and colonized making the colonized practice the same practices in the land of the colonizer and against the latest people, especially women.

Moreover, given that Mustafa's most part of his education is shaped in a foreign Western environment, his use of sexual distortion as a way to assert his self is without doubt an effect of Western cultural and colonial thinking. The protagonist may seem to revenge but in fact what the author produces is another distorted duplication of the Western colonizer's identity. Mimicry, in this sense, seems in the beginning to be just a means of resistance as Bhabha puts it in his *Location of Culture*, but if we think deeply of its outcome, we will find that it is just the first unconscious step towards real hybridization where a diaspora becomes unaware that one really loses the purity of identity and starts constructing a new hybrid identity that is characterized by in-betweenness and thus ambivalence. Mimicry according to Homi Bhabha's approach can help better in one's native home though it also can be endangered by culturization where one loses purity of native identity if the new colonizing culture is admired by natives.

Additionally, the notion of purity and hybridity are in a sense problematized by Mustafa's personality. Accordingly, his Sudanese classmates nicknamed him as "the black English man" (53). Mustafa is then caught up in a middle way, neither pure Eastern even for his native people nor he can be seen as a Western citizen whatever his attempts are to be Westernized. Significantly; Makdisi goes so far to explain that both Mustafa and the narrator are hybrid characters. He remarks that,

Mustafa's problem- and the narrator's- is that they're neither black nor white, but grey; neither wholly Eastern nor wholly Western, neither completely European nor completely Arab

(furthermore, given that Sudan's situation, neither entirely Arab nor entirely African). (Makdisi 1994: 542)

Makdisi's examination of, both characters Mustafa and the narrator, does clearly show the problematic construction of identity of the post-colonial and diasporic subject. As identity loses its purity, it becomes float. Certainly, identity is never stable in all situations, but for a diaspora, it become shaky, uncertain and full of paradoxical attitudes and thoughts. Makdisi's analysis further adds that, both the writer and his protagonist Mustafa are

trapped between cultures ... and here, as intellectual, they are not exceptions to a social norm; rather the contradictions of the rest of society are made explicit and even brought to their logical extremes in Mustafa and the narrator. (Ibid)

Thus, the narrator himself is to be in a sense of hybridized circle. He is deeply obsessed by Sa'eed's life so much so he can't define his sense of 'Self' as he constantly keeps questioning his identity. Even after his death, Sa'eed continues to haunt the narrator through accidental meetings with men of Sa'eed's generation. In this respect, the narrator is caught up in an aura of self-doubt about his own identity "purity" and whether or not like Sa'eed, he is the victim of cultural contagion. He keeps asking,

was it likely that what happened to Mustafa Sa'eed could happen to me? He said that he was a lie, so was I a lie too? I am from here is not reality enough? I too had lived with them superficially, neither loving them nor hating them. (49).

Consequently, the narrator's self in this sense is placed between two paradoxical notions, hybridity and purity. In fact, the narrator's identity is put in displacement; he finds himself in a new space that is not his native land and culture, nor it is the host culture and place. Such space is coined by being a 'third space' where identity loses its certainty of its geographical as well as psychological belonging.

Questioning Identity: Preservation and Loss in Aboulela's *The Translator*

Cultural identity is among the prominent problematic productions of the diasporic experiences. The diaspora people consciously come to appropriately revalue their sense of identity, culture and homeland. Their lively experience in abroad and the constant "Other" they are prone to heighten in their cultural awareness and therefore solidify their ties with their original identity. However, identity as a culture is to be reshaped and reconstructed depending on the cultural and social changes that an individual is to undergo through. Thus, the concept of identity is a negotiable notion that has to be associated with the current social changes. Actually, such view of none-fixed identity is clear and so relevant to the protagonists of Aboulela's *The Translator*. Sammar and Rae's identities are caught up in a destabilized position. Both make a modification to their identity cultures. The text reflects many instances that signify Aboulela's linkage to her original identity. Though she writes in the colonizer's language, her use of Arabic words, such as bismillah, shahada, salamo alyakom etc, unfold her Arabic and Muslim authentic identity and an attempt to preserve her native identity. Besides, Sammar's

preservation of her identity is exemplified in her articulation of Arabic language: “yesterday when I spoke in Arabic to Fareed, I felt that home was close” (106). Elsewhere in the text, Sammar’s clinging to her pure Arabic and Islamic identity is explicitly asserted, for she “had enjoyed talking in Arabic, words like insha’ Allah, fitting naturally in everything that was said, part of the sentences, the vision” (166). Moreover, Sammar’s deep devotion to her Islamic faith may also stand as a powerful sign in preserving her authentic religious identity within a secular world. Preserving the Islamic identity makes of the text closer to preserve the original identity because it works as immunization against the opposing traditions that are found in the host land.

However, just like other diaspora subjects, Sammar's articulation of her authentic identity could not stand to be immune to the alien culture. Her implicit inclination to the Western traditions contradicts with her original identity. An example of this cultural contamination may well be reflected in her appearance for “she covers herself with Italian silk, her arm with tropical colours” (9). Also, another sign that destabilizes her identity is when “she wore sunglasses now” (135). Such contaminating aspects are therefore a strong proof of Sammar’s hybridity and loss of lots of her original traditional norms which she cannot always preserve for longer time.

More surprisingly is Aboulela’s representation of Rae’s hybridized identity. In a world where Sammar is might be supposed to fall in Rae’s culture, she instead proves to be strong enough to pull him into her own cultural confinement. Sammar’s possession of power and knowledge paves

her the way to alter Rae’s Western ideals and beliefs towards none-Western cultures. Thus, Aboulela presents Rae as an example of contradictory Orientalist discourse. He adopts Arab’s culture and “he looks exactly like an Arab” (60). Additionally, Rae’s hybrid culture is effectively shown in his adoption of the “Moors” religion. “He went into mosques, learnt to take his shoes off, sit cross-legged on the floor” (60). Also, the narrator notes that Rae’s culture is almost changed and as a result Rae looks “a half-foreign” (164). Surely, Rae is just an imagined character in a novel, where the author puts the roles consciously. This, of course can play a great role in defending the Sudanese Muslim identity and at the same time show a kind of revenge against Western colonizers who insist on converting Eastern native to their culture. The author uses imagined changes in Rae's character as writing back to the Western colonial treatment of the native colonized cultures.

In the previous section of this paper, we notice how Tayeb Saleh used sexualizing the West as a means of resistance, but here Aboulela uses two ways of resistance. The first way is drawing an image of a Western man, Rae, as able to be convinced rather than being convincing. She deprives him from the place of the subject making him able to convert to an oriental culture just to continue his love relation with Sammar. The second means used as resistance by the author is the preservation of religious . Aboulela might not be that conservative as seen in the text, but she chooses religion to be a strong topic that hardly accepts negotiations and also because it can preserve many norms and traditions of the native culture. The author also exploits the chance

of using the religious topic to defend her own religion which has been misrepresented by the Western colonial agendas.

Apparently in the text, Sammar's strong ties to her Islamic pure identity serve to transmit various cultural dimensions that the author is at pains to convey to the Western audience in particular. Orientalist negative defining of Islam as a religion of intolerants, backwards, aggressive, etc, is, thus, deconstructed through Aboulela's representation of Sammar as a Muslim woman who initiates harmony, love and peace between the South and the North.

During the course of the text, Sammar represents the emblem of Muslims whose spiritual characteristics are pregnant with the desire to alter Orientalist hegemonic discourse vis-à-vis Islamic religion and its believers. She is a woman who feels in her faith a sense of happiness, enjoyment and peace which work as a new space that brings her to her original culture. In the text, there are many instances that sustain the true interpretation of Islam. When, for instance, she enters the mosque, "she felt eerily alone in the spacious room with its high ceiling", however, once reciting her religious prayers" the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinter inside her coming together" (75). Besides, Sammar seems not only to obey Islamic instructions for only herself, but takes on the task of bringing to the light the truthful meaning of Islamic sharia's rituals in empowering the individual and social ties. Subverting attitudes against Islamic instructions, Sammar "thought of how Allah's sharia'a was kinder and more balanced than the rules people set up for themselves...Nothing that Allah forbids His

servants is good...It will only diminish them ultimately or soon, in this life or the next". (76) It is therefore through Sammar's articulation of Islamic true dictations that Aboulela implicitly aims to produce a counter-discourse to the Western negative perception of Muslims' religious identity. In this sense, Aboulela's

depiction of Islam as a foundation for social justice opposes Western imperial discourses which depict Islam as a backward, barbaric religion of extremists and terrorists. Her use of Islam also provides an alteration narrative to those articulations of resistance which appeal to secular or humanist values. (Smyth :11)

The text, in fact, presents Sammar as a true believer woman who sees in her fate an ultimate rescue from the social and psychological symptoms. She unlike the Season's protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed, whose innate characteristics do enhance the Western stereotypical vision towards Islam, Sammar seems to be very touched to her faith to the extent that her love relationship to Rae could not be materialized and consumed unless it parallels with Sharia's (Islamic law) restrictions. Therefore, Sammar consciously attempts to alter Rae's mind, as an embodiment of Western way of thinking, how Islam refuses prostitution and illegitimate sexual relationships. Thus, to materialize their love relationship, Sammar sees Rae's conversion to Islam as a primary condition to being together. "She wanted to say, because unless you become a Muslim we will not be able to get married, we will not be together and I'll be miserable"(89). Crucially, the notion of conversion seems to be the major block standing against Sammar

and Rae's love fulfilment. Sammar's constantly insistence on conversion and Rae's rooted doubt about Islam tends to be a major theme within the text.

Consequently, for Sammar, marrying a non-Muslim man, "that would be against the sharia" (92). However, Rae's consciousness of Islam is not to be undermined. In her confession to Rae's Islamic knowledge, Sammar says "But he always says things about Islam, things I didn't even know"(93). However, Rae's view of Islam is placed in an ambivalent position. Though he seems to defend Islam in his book "the Illusion of an Islamic threat", he still could not accept converting to Islamic religion. His interest in Islam is no more than an Orientalist technique of searching for knowledge as a means of power over the Orient. Therefore, for Rae, "it's not in me to be religious... I studied Islam for the politics of the Middle East. I didn't study it for myself. I was not searching for spirituality" (126).

It is this spiritual problematic of Rae that destabilizes Sammar's love to him. She heartily tries to save his soul and their relationship as well. She begs him "if you say shahada it would be enough. We could get married "(127). Therefore, Sammar's sense of spirituality does work as a barrier between the worldly desires and the obedience of her religion. It is this strong depiction of faith that labels The Translator as a more spiritual text than anything else. Through the same vein, W'all S. Hassan, a lecturer at the Illinois Uneversity, rmarks that the text is a

story of spiritual growth, with its central conflict being not, as in Season, between colonizer and

colonized, or between traditional norms and the violent intrusion of modernity, or even between oppressive patriarchy and a feminist, liberatory impulse but rather between worldly desires and spiritual disciplines-an internal conflict experienced by the faith and which serves as a theme for a great many didactic narratives in Islam and many other religious traditions as well. (Wall: 11)

Nonetheless, Sammar's seek spiritual feelings towards Rae are healed at the end of the story. Her power does bring Rae under her request, for she manages to alter his rooted Orientalist attitudes towards Islam and make him convert to her faith which was once perceived as a religion of backwards and terrorists. Thus, "Rae has become a Muslim, he had said the shahada" (190). It follows that Rae's conversion serves to subvert one of the central Western basic principles of binary thinking towards Islam as a religion, identity and culture of many of the Orientals. Significantly enough, Rae as a Western figure participates in criticising the Orientalist hegemonic ideology from within. His embracing of Islam deconstructs Orientalist misinterpretation of Islam as a false religion. Rae, therefore, recognises that Islam is not as it is presented in Western literary and discursive tradition, but instead a faith of liberation and dignity. He says, "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" (199).

Conclusion

It is controversial is all diaspora have the same influences on their identities. This paper concludes by saying that not all diaspora individuals' identities have the same changes that the host culture effects immigrants. Tayeb Saleh as a writer shows a keen desire to stand against any changes in his identity and tries to writeback to the colonial endeavours by sexualizing the West and murdering its women as a kind of revenge to what colonizers have done in his land. However, Aboulela's view and aims are different seem to show more awareness of what kind of resistance should be used in her text. Yet, both writers along with their main protagonists cannot escape the process of hybridization. Language, wearing, behaviour and the ambivalent attitudes show

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that both writers feel in a space that is not their native nor it seems to be the host place. Paradox is clear in their declarations on the mouth of their protagonists. All protagonists feel astray and can hardly find a way to feel their identities for shot times. They defend their homeland but they admire the host land as well. They lose the sense of belonging because they belong to two places, two cultures and this creates a new ambivalent identity that is not stable and not certain whether the host people are their colonizers earlier or they themselves have become citizens like them. Certainly, they are no longer pure Sudanese not they can be real Westerners. Thus, they both resemble the dilemma of diaspora people.