

AN ARAB FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE OF LEILA ABOLELA'S *THE TRANSLATOR*

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ABSTRACT:

The tenacity of the paper is an attempt to provide a critical insight into Arab Feminism and analyse The Translator in the light of Arab Feminism, highlighting all the major issues in the novel. This paper also has thrown light upon the Orientalist discourse that is prevalent within the framework of the novel. In The Translator, Aboulela asserts that strong faith helps individual to deal with the challenges of the society and how this faith reflects on the decisions made by a being. She also delineates her protagonist's development in spiritual strength to overcome her obstacles and a strong connection with Tenets of Islam. Through the novel and the protagonist it becomes obvious that the issues pertaining to social class, difference in ethnicities, culture and language can be

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Arab feminism is a branch of feminism that is indigenous and deep rooted, not necessarily adapted from western perceptions of Feminism or influenced by it. Arab feminism is not a product of West. It was a consequence of what had previously taken place and had spurred the ignition of it.

Taking Arab Feminism into consideration in the context the liberation and Freedom of Arab women, it is also evident that it began simultaneously with the onset of Arab renaissance during 19th century. The rise of feminism can be perceived as a result of Westernization and also has the impacts of the cultural and various other aspects. It also is a reflection of the methods in which these aspects are absorbed in the ways of life in the people who follow Arabic culture.

Initially Arab feminism was a plea for women's rights to be a considerable part of the broad movement that aimed at the restructuring of Islamic practices that were patriarchal with no proper references, and in turn that

would resolve the entire societal order of the Islamic societies. In due course “Arab Feminism was born within, and continues to suffer from the predicament caused by the double struggle: internally against the old religious, social and economic order; and externally against European colonisation.” (Golley 529).

For centuries, women have had a low status in Arab culture. From the latter part of nineteenth century, Western influence and processes of modernization led to a change in the position and the eminence of women. The feminist ideas began to grow and develop when Arab women started going out of their homes to study and became increasingly aware of their liberation. Thus the nineteenth century saw the birth of a feminist discourse among Arab women on topics such as education, work, marriage, suffrage, and breaking out of their isolation.

The study of Arab feminism has developed in the recent years to the maximum, with the advent of the various scholars like Leila Ahmed (1940), Egyptian American writer on Islam Miriam Cooke (1948), an American who deals mostly with the Middle Eastern studies. Beth Baron, Assistant Professor of History in New York University and also the author of the famous book *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*. Fatima Mernissi (1940) an eminent Islamic feminist scholar from Morocco, who has laid hands on a number of issues such as the women's roles in Islam re-interpretations of Islam from the feminist point of view.

Valentine Moghadam, (1952) who can be considered as one of the chief contributors to the Iranian feminism, Margot Badran, belongs to United States, and Nawal El Saadawi (1931) an Egyptian writer, feminist and activist, all of them delved into the issues and theories concerning two aspects women's writing and women's writing in Arabic in particular. These were few main writers and thinkers representing the foundations of Arab feminist thought in this period

Arab feminism did not find favour and acceptance in the West. “The textured image of exoticism which has been woven in the West over the centuries still dominates the way in which the Arab world is perceived. Orientalist discourse have influenced the way that Arab Feminism, in particular, has been received and understood in the West” (Golley 522). When the history of the participation of Women is viewed there is a significant participation of women in the struggles that were nationalist, found prevalent throughout Arab countries, such as Egypt, Syria, the Sudan and Palestine.

When one considers the vast differences in Arab women's lives from the Atlantic to Iraq and throughout the different social, economic, educational, religious, sexual and other determining factors, the aura of exoticism that surrounds the term ‘Arab woman’ may dissolve, giving way to a more realistic and practical way not just of representing women but also of changing their lives. Western misrepresentation of Arab women is one

manifestation of the way Islam, usually taken to refer to Arabic culture at large, has been misconstrued. (Golley 522).

In this case *The Translator* breaks the barriers of the readers worldwide, and presents Sammar, as the widow who is efficient and is capable to take care of herself. She does not endorse the image of the exoticism but rather portrays the woman who is in hijab covering her hair not her mind or her intellectual.

“Mernissi offers a specialized and detailed study of how the veil and seclusion of women developed in Islam. According to her, the veil—with its connotation of seclusion—is: a key concept in Muslim civilization” (Golley 524)

As HaidehMoghissi has emphasised in her work *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of a Post-Modern Analysis*, denies the patriarchal notions of Islam and its seemingly oppressing impositions on women. She also proclaims that the *Shari'a*, becomes the basis of the rules of Islam, that deals with the women’s legal rights pertaining to marriage, property, divorce and inheritance of property. It also defines the women’s participation in the activities of politics and the society.

The Translator, the novel was written by Leila Aboulela and published in the year 1999. It portrayed and depicted a Sudanese widow working as an Arabic translator in Scotland, grieving both the loss of her husband and her homeland. Aboulela's own state of mind after she relocated to Aberdeen from Khartoum in the late 1980s with her family, and found her suffering deep withdrawal symptoms from her beloved home city.

The Translator draws on the protagonist, Sammar’s experience of many years as a Translator working in Britain. The book highlights a variety of forms of women’s oppression in Sudan. Leila Aboulela in *The Translator* shows, through the character of Sammar, the Muslim female characters within the two discourses, among which one was Islamism and Orientalism on the other. She confronts Orientalist and Islamist hegemonic discourses which both stereotypes and predetermine ‘the Muslim Woman’.

Meanwhile the novel significantly deals with the articulation of the woman’s voice; it envisages the experiences and the dreams that are curbed due to the patriarchal influence of the society and its norms. In this view Leila Aboulela wonderfully employs her eccentric tone in establishing the Arab feminism that does not reflect or imitate the western feminism in any approach.

The Translator puts forth the patriarchal notions about marriage, widowhood, widow remarriage and the seemingly impossible romance between the Sammar and Rae. This also perpetrates the notion and raises the questions about the various rules that are prevalent within the religious discourse and also unleashes the fact

the deep rooted patriarchal notions about all these mentioned above. The protagonist Sammar breaks through all the norms. Though she feels numb and crippled due to certain incidents in life, she does not let them decide her entire life, but moves forward in a way to lead a new and renewed life. On the first hand the very act of her expressing her feelings towards Rae and not succumbing to the oppressing things around her seem to portray her in the lime light where she becomes the epitome of the views which are proposed Arab Feminism i.e. freedom to speech and expression. Various such instances mark her courage and determination to see through life.

An educated girl like you, you know English ... you can support yourself and your son, you don't need marriage. What do you need it for?(Aboulela 13). In the given lines, Aboulela analyses the religious tradition that is entrenched in patriarchal structures and emphasizes on female sovereignty by saying this she also reiterates the past tradition where widow women needed some sort of safety and protection, Sammar's economic situation is different and she does not find a suitable position in the past tradition. The hidden cruelty and insensitivity towards Sammar recurs repeatedly when she returns to Khartoum, culminating in a terrible fight in which her mother-in-law accuses her of not contributing financially and of killing her son. Thus she decides to return to her work. Nevertheless she does not leave her obligatory prayer.

We also see that Sammar tries to establish a better society for the women who are more or less like her, and she also want to question the existing injustice. She seeks to emphasize on the importance of education, values and unity among women

Aboulela provides the feminized Islamic discourse which creates a positive space for her female protagonist Sammar, who clearly negotiates her own positioning within cross-cultural encounters (Nash 28). Despite the persistence of many forms of oppression in the rural areas, vividly described in *The Translator*, Aboulela sees many economic and social changes since she went to live in the city.

In *The Translator*, Aboulela presents the Orientalist views as described by Edward Said. The novel explores the power of translation the building of a bridge between cultures and people. Aboulela presents the situation of a woman who is conscious and mindful of the patriarchal subjugation and understands the male position in the novel. In spite of which the Sammar manages to establish a relationship with Rae. Translation becomes the vital reason that brings them together.

Said argues:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, deserving 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. (3)

Said continues:

Therefore , Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions ; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient ; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious “Western” imperialist plot to hold down the “Oriental” world . It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic,sociological, and historical and philological texts. (12)

The terminologies used by Said are “dominate,” “authority,” “ruling,” and “authorizing” these are the familiar words in terms of studies on masculinity. “Orientalism then, can be understood as a discourse informed by notions of Western masculinity in which the West is strong, upright, rational, and male, while the Orient is weak, passive, irrational, and female” (Said 137–138).

It is in the given context, that we understand the representation of Rae Isles. He is presented as a well-respected scholar in and his opinions on Middle Eastern issues are sought by various media outlets. Several times, Sammar remarks that Rae teaches her things about Islam that she doesn’t know. In the novel Aboulela offers the readers an alternative narrative through relationship between a man who is orientalist and a Muslim woman.

However, as John Stotesbury emphasizes, Rae encounters the Muslim world from the focus position of the aloof, detached, objective Western intellectual. Yasmin, Rae’s secretary, also comments on Rae’s attitude towards knowledge, telling Sammar that “Western scholars could study all sorts of sacred texts and be detached” (Aboulela 93). Rae himself tells Sammar, “I believed the best I could do, what I owed a place and people who had deep meaning for me, was to be objective, detached. In the middle of all the prejudice and hypocrisy, I wanted to be one of the few who were saying what was reasonable and right” (Gelfer 91).

Sammar is distressed with Rae's status as Orientalist. However, Sammar has the strength to confront Rae's Orientalist position. She tells him, "Don't you realize how much you hurt me staying objective and detached, like you are above all of this, above me, looking down" (Gelfer 91). Her point is that Rae's professed detachment and objectivity is in fact an illusion. Rae is not able to remain apart from socio-cultural contexts. Rae shows himself as an Orientalist, privilege and status as a white, European and Western academic, with profound intellectual thoughts.

Another way the novel's representation of Rae challenges Orientalist notions of Western masculinity is through Rae's illness. Rae is not a physically strong person. Whereas Western notions of intellectual activity have traditionally associated the masculine with the disembodied mind, Rae's intellect is compared to that of a dying animal. Stotesbury argues that Rae's physical weakness and hospitalization becomes the reason for Sammar to approach him considering him to be a person of equality. His conversations with Sammar and his academic work are interrupted either by violent coughing fits or by his hospitalization. Thus, Rae's illness represents the inherent contradictions involved in the notion of Orientalist masculinity.

While Rae claims to be objective, rational, and disconnected from the people around him, but in reality, his body's emphatic condition reveals that these Orientalist notions are illusory because Rae does not practically fit into them. Rae's illness thus functions as a representative of the hegemonic notion of masculinity in dilemma. And this finally comes to a culmination in the following instance wherein his masculinity is in problem.

He expresses to Sammar that, he was in a big house that had vast rooms, to him it seems like a mansion as well. He continues to say that "I was hiding because outside the house I had been followed chased for days. I carried a sword in my hand and there was blood on it, my enemies' blood, but I myself, my clothes and my hands were clean and I was proud of that" (Aboulela 95).

He continues to bring in the imagery of the room that was filled with smoke. He further explains that the room didn't have fire but it was just smoke that had built into a lot of smoke. He also says that when he had left the room the sword had broken and he had held in hands. The sword could never be mended and could never be reliable again. He also expresses with agony that it seemed to be a terrible loss and he had to go without the sword instead.

The imagery of the broken sword clearly suggests that Rae's masculinity is in crisis. At the culmination of the dream, Rae dirges the loss of the power this version of masculinity has conferred upon him. There are also strong significances in this dream with the notion of jihad as an "internal spiritual struggle" with the violence and bloodshed also hinting at Rae struggles with the notion of conversion to Islam. Again, Rae's clothes are clean, which seems to indicate that the struggle which he underwent both physically and mentally (due to physical illness). The central thrust of the dream is to reinforce the notion of masculinity in crisis, of hegemonic Orientalist articulations of masculinity being no longer available to Rae.

The novel carefully subverts the Orientalist authority. However, both Rae and Sammar reject the positions of the young terrorist who asserts that, "Western men worship money and Women. Some of them see the world through dollar bills, some of them see the world though the thighs of a woman" (Aboulela 159).

But as the novel ends we see that the Orientalism is reversed. Rae should have protected Sammar from her presumed backward culture but he apparently fails to do so. In fact, the novel also presents to us a contrary rescue narrative and tells a story in which a woman from Sudan saves a European /Western man. It is Sammar's soup which reinstates Rae's health helps him recover soon, and Sammar tells Rae to follow to Islam she also adds saying that it would be good for him and will make him stronger as well. Sammar is not in need of Rae to save her; instead Rae requires the concern and care of Sammar for a better life. This proved true when she saves Rae, both physically and spiritually.

We also observe that in the novel that Sammar is very particular about the conversion of Rae. It appears as if the only way an Islamic woman can pursue her love is through conversion to Islam. Ferial Ghazoul refers to Rae's conversion and claims:

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

Rae's conversion reinforces the validity of Islam as a worldview which offers a promise of social justice and resistance. Sammar articulates to Rae that "The first believers were mostly women and slaves. I

don't know why, may be they had soft hearts, I don't know" (Aboulela 126). Rae replies, "May be in changing they did not have much to lose... It was the rulers of Makkah who were reluctant to give up their traditions and established ways for something new"(126).

The concept of Islam which Aboulela articulates in her novel draws upon the traditions of both Islamic liberation theology and Islamic feminism to challenge both Orientalist and patriarchal Islamist notions of religious experience. Aboulela's articulation does not deal with a staunch belief or an abstract idea that is unsubstantiated. She apparently deals with the sense of self restraint that prevails over the struggle to grasp the fervour of the religious experiences. It also reiterates the fact where a woman is caught between two poles, wherein in one she cannot solely express her dreams and on the other she cannot accept the reality of patriarchy that pulls her down.

The Translator it is the private domain which she succeeds in. Arab Feminism becomes a greater accomplishment for both the authors to decipher the reality of the Islamic-world. The text argues that the change in the stance on women in the society of Arab is essential to validate the works of Arab Women. Therefore, the novel presents the need for self - expression of women which is far different from that of men. These writers to voice their views regarding the major issues like, role of women in building the country, their responsibility within the family, wearing of *hijab* or veiling.

The novel clearly to a certain extent elucidated how the down the major rules of Islam (Hadith) which are misinterpreted and has presented the real and the genuine meaning of it. Also bringing women to the centre, not to push men to the margin, but rather claiming the space the women deserve. The novel has lucidly depicted the Arab feminism through the issues faced and resolved by Sammar. It has also dispensed as of how women attain a sense of independence within the broad spectrum of Religion. And effectively establishes a strong assertion that Arab feminism nurtures women to flourish and does not deteriorate them to perish.

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