

FAITH, HYBRIDITY, AND ARAB-MUSLIM FEMALE AGENCY IN LEILA ABOULELA'S *THE TRANSLATOR*

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Abstract

This article examines Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* as a reimagining of cultural hybridity and diasporic identity through a framework rooted in Islamic ethics and African feminist negotiation. Challenging dominant postcolonial and secular feminist readings that equate agency with rupture, rebellion, or assimilation, the study foregrounds negotiation as a spiritually grounded mode of subjectivity. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," Islamic feminist theory, and Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-feminism, the article argues that faith is not an obstacle to hybridity but its moral structure. Through close analysis of Sammar's experience as a Sudanese Muslim woman in Scotland, particularly through her worship, relationship with Rae, translation work, and reflective interiority, it positions negotiation as an Afro-Islamic mode of agency rooted in religious discernment and spiritual clarity. Rather than casting hybridity as improvisation or secular liberation, the novel affirms a form of hybridity shaped by Islamic duties and virtues through Aboulela's depiction of Sammar as a modern Muslim woman. This study contributes a new perspective to postcolonial and feminist literary criticism by demonstrating how *The Translator* reframes Arab-Muslim women's literary voices through the lens of religiously grounded negotiation and Afro-Islamic feminist aesthetics.

Keywords: cultural hybridity, Islamic feminism, Arab women, diasporic identity, female agency.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary readings of Anglophone Muslim fiction often treat faith as background sentiment or as an obstacle to agency, a reduction that flattens how religious ethics organise intercultural life. This article contends that Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* reconceives hybridity as a morally grounded process through which a diasporic subject deliberates, chooses, and belongs. The novel follows Sammar, a Sudanese widow and Arabic-English translator in Aberdeen, whose life after loss is shaped by the demands of devotion and the pressures of migration. Through Sammar's developing relationship with Rae Isles, a Scottish academic of Islamic studies, Aboulela stages the intricacies of intercultural attachment while refusing to

detach choice from belief. This focus is significant within Arab feminist fiction, where women's empowerment is often interpreted through paradigms of rupture, resistance, or assimilation. By contrast, *The Translator* presents a protagonist whose decisions in love, work, and worship are grounded in religious commitment, extending feminist representation beyond secular frames and challenging assumptions that cast Muslim piety as merely private or as a barrier to autonomy.

Aboulela's narrative shows that devotion and intentional piety can be structuring forces of diasporic life. Sammar's public prayer in secular spaces, her insistence on shared belief as the condition for intimacy, her professional labour as a translator mediating between Arabic and English, and the novel's treatment of memory illustrate how faith becomes a guiding principle of selfhood. These practices operate as acts of deliberation through which Sammar sets boundaries, weighs emotional desire against religious obligation, and preserves her sense of integrity in unfamiliar spaces. This orientation resonates with discussions in Islamic feminist thought and with debates in postcolonial studies about forms of belonging that are maintained rather than dissolved. Building on this context, the article argues that *The Translator* reframes hybridity and diasporic belonging not as improvisation detached from belief but as negotiation anchored in Islamic commitments. The novel thus models an Afro-Islamic feminist aesthetic in which negotiation, responsibility, and continuity shape Arab-Muslim female agency in the diaspora.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although *The Translator* has received sustained attention for its treatment of exile, cultural dislocation, and gender, it remains underexamined in scholarship that centres Aboulela's representation of the protagonist's Islamic faith as the organising framework of her agency as a Muslim woman. Earlier criticism often foregrounded exile and identity without centring faith as an organising principle in discussions of Sammar as a character. More recent studies, however, clarify how the novel crafts a distinctly Muslim mode of action for the protagonist. Abdelghani and Hamdoune (2024) read Sammar's identity as an ongoing, border-shaped process, which frames her crossings as feminist self-fashioning and helps explain her faith-led terms for intimacy and belonging; for Sammar, this makes movement a site of agency rather than drift. Likewise, Ben Amara (2024) tracks crossing and journeying as strategies that unsettle fixity; read alongside Sammar's visible piety, this shows Aboulela's Islamic feminism as mobility governed by belief, not cultural improvisation. Al-Khayyat and Abu Amrieh (2023) identify narrative cues of religious difference and re-attunement; this directly grounds Sammar's boundary-setting with Rae as principled feminist judgement rooted in devotion. Majid (2020) links Sammar's ritual repetition to moral self-formation and transformed belonging; in *The Translator*, prayer, fasting, and remembrance therefore function as agentive self-fashioning, not private sentiment, which renders Sammar's practices legible as feminist agency. Complementary work on the poetics and politics of belonging, such as Assa (2024), supports reading Sammar's public worship as confident feminist presence that resists assimilationist invisibility. Zannoun (2019) treats love and language as pragmatic, de-binarising acts; this frames the Sammar–Rae relationship as value-consistent negotiation rather than capitulation or secular liberation, aligning with Aboulela's Islamic feminism. Taken together, the scholarship on the novel converges on a clear pattern: Sammar is read as a feminist subject whose agency is produced through faith-structured deliberation enacted in worship, intimacy, language work, and the novel's reflective cadence.

By contrast, secular readings that prioritise rupture or assimilation leave the religious and moral principles of Sammar's choices under-theorised, a gap the following debates help to address. Ahmed's notion of Anglophone Islam (2022) legitimises reading belief-articulated agency in English and situates Aboulela's project at the junction of textual form and lived practice, the very space where Sammar's decisions are made public. Within Islamic feminist thought, Wadud (1999; 2006) and Cooke (2001) ground Sammar's dignity and agency in accountability and intentional piety; this names what Sammar enacts when she sets non-negotiable terms for intimacy and maintains visible worship in secular settings. Additionally, Mahmood (2005) reframes Sammar's agency as the meaningful inhabiting of norms; this explains her adherence to prayer, modesty, and halal discipline as deliberate self-craft, not passivity. Nnaemeka's nego-feminism (2004) theorises relational and strategic action; this renders Sammar's pursuit of gains without sacrificing core commitments, including her refusal of a union lacking shared belief, as calibrated feminist agency. Together, these perspectives articulate the feminist and postcolonial stakes of Aboulela's Islamic feminism.

Building on this scholarship, the article examines Aboulela's emphasis on religiously grounded agency across four textual sites in *The Translator*: public worship as deliberate self-fashioning and confident presence; negotiated intimacy with Rae on the non-negotiable ground of shared belief; translation as mediation that preserves a religious core while moving across worlds; and a reflective narrative structure that frames Sammar's growth as calibration rather than rupture. These four sites have been selected because they represent the recurring narrative spaces in which Sammar's agency is most directly tested: the body in worship, the heart in intimate attachment, language in intercultural mediation, and memory in the shaping of narrative form. Together, they allow the analysis to move from visible religious practice to emotional, linguistic, and formal dimensions of the novel, showing how faith operates across action, relationship, speech, and structure. Reading the novel through these sites recentres Aboulela's Islamic feminist aesthetics and shows how religious conviction organises Sammar's deliberation, attachment, and presence in diaspora. This synthesis specifies how hybridity functions as a coherent, value-guided practice within a single text and addresses the gap in prior studies that mapped themes of exile and identity without explaining the religious and moral aspects of Sammar's choices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article adopts a framework centred on negotiation as the key to identity, agency, and belonging in *The Translator*. At its core is Homi K. Bhabha's cultural hybridity and the "Third Space," which reconceives identity as fluid, produced between cultures rather than fixed within them (1994). Bhabha's notion of negotiation clarifies how antagonistic elements can be articulated without collapse (1994, p. 25). Yet his formulation often presumes a secular horizon. By analysing Sammar, a widow, translator, and believer in a British setting, this study treats hybridity not as improvisation but as religiously guided decision-making grounded in Islamic tradition. In this reading, when a choice is called "ethical", it signals akhlaq-oriented reasoning about right action and accountability to God and community; the term "spiritual" refers to inward devotional practices that cultivate God-consciousness and "religious" denotes publicly recognisable observances and juristic norms. Woven into the analysis, this layered vocabulary avoids conflation and shows how embodied ritual, inward devotion, and deliberative judgement combine to shape female agency. Accordingly, Sammar's boundary-setting with Rae is read as ethical deliberation, prayer and dhikr as spiritual disciplines, and hijab or halal discipline as religious observances. Set alongside Bhabha, negotiation appears as a morally accountable practice rather than a purely secular play of differences.

To further contextualise our use of the term “hybridity”, the selected framework situates negotiation within Sudan’s historical and socio-political pressures, including colonial fragmentation, elite Arabisation, and religious marginalisation. Douglas H. Johnson traces the country’s civil wars to entrenched patterns of governance built on slavery, exclusion, and narrow nationalisms (2016, pp. ix–x). In such conditions, negotiation is not theoretical but a practice of survival. The intersections of ethnicity, religion, and ideology have racialised faith and regulated everyday life, from the Islamisation of law in Khartoum to conflicts in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains. Against this backdrop, Sammar’s interior struggle mirrors a wider cultural habitus trained to balance competing claims without surrendering conviction. The analysis therefore treats the novel’s hybrid space as lived and morally charged, not abstract. Prayer and remembrance cultivate perception as spiritual disciplines; hijab and halal discipline operate as religious observances located in communal norms; boundary-setting in intimacy and work becomes ethical deliberation because it weighs right action under pressure. Hybridity, so understood, refers to the interstitial arena where these dimensions meet, allowing a diasporic subject to pursue coherence while navigating unequal institutions and secular assumptions.

Islamic feminist thinkers deepen this frame. Leila Ahmed shows how colonial regimes co-opted feminist language to discipline Muslim cultures (1992, p. 237). Fatima Mernissi challenges patriarchal exegetical monopolies, arguing that constraints reflect elite interests rather than scripture (1991, p. ix). Meanwhile, Saba Mahmood retheorises agency as disciplined self-formation through piety, where submission to norms can be agentive because it crafts coherence (2005, pp. 31–32). Postcolonial critics add cautions about representation: Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques the homogenising figure of the Third World woman and calls for context-specific solidarities (1988), while Gayatri Spivak highlights how the subaltern’s speech is muted in dominant frames (1988, p. 119). Obioma Nnaemeka’s Nego-feminism reflects a relational, context-aware mode of agency achieved through calibrated give-and-take that protects principle and sustains community (2004, pp. 360–361). Read together, these perspectives clarify why Sammar moves by negotiating rather than abandoning institutions, as seen in her terms for marriage, her public worship, and her translation in secular spaces. In Marnia Lazreg’s sense, this is a personal engagement with religion rather than submission to external control (2009, p. 75). *The Translator* thus offers a counter-narrative in which hybridity is shown as a concept laden with complexity, shaped by values, history, and faith, and where agency emerges as a sustained, religiously anchored practice.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Faith and Identity Formation

In *The Translator*, faith serves as the main point of orientation through which Sammar’s identity is morally negotiated and spiritually reconstituted. Rather than functioning as a background theme to cultural displacement, faith emerges as a practice that shapes how she understands grief, movement, and desire. Aboulela portrays Islam as a commitment that evolves through grief, introspection, and value-guided discernment; it is presented as an active and lived reality rather than a static cultural inheritance. Sammar’s return to prayer following the death of her husband initiates a gradual recovery of selfhood, not through escape from loss, but through a return to words and gestures that give loss a moral shape. In a pivotal moment, “Now she stood alone under the high ceiling of the ancient college, began to say silently, All praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all the worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful... and the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinters inside her coming together” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 74). Here, spiritual renewal shows up through the texture of the scene itself. The phrase “the certainty of the words” shows that prayer

does not simply comfort Sammar; it gives her a way to recognise herself again. The image of “all the splinters inside her coming together” makes grief appear as fragmentation, while recitation becomes the act that gathers the broken self without denying its pain. The setting also matters: the “ancient college” is not an obviously sacred place, yet Sammar’s prayer allows the sacred to enter a secular institution without apology or concealment. Taken together, these moves integrate the self within faith; they mark a steady consolidation of identity rather than assimilation.

Sammar’s negotiation of identity is an active, value-driven process shaped by her Sudanese Islamic worldview. Her decisions emerge through a spiritual logic that reframes agency as coherence between faith and context. Rather than responding to the pressures of Western secularism through rejection or assimilation, Sammar embodies a reflective engagement grounded in *tawakkul*, or trust in divine will. This orientation is expressed in her affirmation: “My fate is etched out by Allah Almighty, if and who I will marry, what I eat, the work I find, my health, the day I will die are as He alone wants them to be” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 73). The sentence gathers ordinary matters such as food, work, marriage, health, and death into one field of divine accountability. Sammar’s faith is therefore not limited to ritual practice; it shapes the everyday decisions through which she understands freedom, dependence, and responsibility. Her sense of self, purpose, and belonging aligns with a belief system that understands life events as part of a larger divine plan. In the context of Sudan’s historical experience, characterised by colonial fragmentation, political unrest, and religious pluralism, such a view reflects a cultural ethos of endurance and responsibility (Johnson, 2016, pp. ix–x, 128–129).

When Sammar is confronted with Rae’s affection, she does not deny the relationship entirely, nor does she accept it on Western terms. She clarifies the spiritual conditions required for such a union: “If you say the *shahadah* it would be enough. We could get married.” Rae responds, “I have to be sure. I would despise myself if I wasn’t sure” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 127). The exchange is brief, but its restraint is revealing. Sammar does not plead, dramatise, or manipulate Rae; she states the condition plainly, allowing his belief to remain a matter of conscience rather than emotional pressure. Rae’s hesitation also prevents the *shahadah* from becoming a romantic shortcut, since he recognises that conversion without conviction would violate both himself and the faith Sammar takes seriously. Through this exchange, Sammar establishes faith as the foundation upon which emotional and relational choices must rest. Her influence becomes more apparent when Rae, after observing her integrity, remarks, “It didn’t have anything to do with how much I’ve read or how many facts I’ve learned about Islam. Knowledge is necessary, that’s true. But faith, it comes direct from Allah” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 198). Rae’s words distinguish academic knowledge from inward belief, a distinction central to the novel’s treatment of Islam. Sammar’s presence teaches him that faith cannot be reduced to information, research, or cultural expertise; it must be received as conviction. His realisation illustrates how Sammar’s steady practice of faith exerts a transformative influence on him, one that is neither imposed nor performative. Her navigation of difference presents a distinctive form of Arab-Muslim feminist agency, one that affirms spiritual clarity while accommodating cultural multiplicity through deliberation rather than defiance.

Throughout *The Translator*, Aboulela challenges secular frameworks that often associate postcolonial selfhood with liberation from tradition. She envisions a model where faith becomes integral to autonomy and diasporic subjectivity. As Leila Ahmed (1992) affirms, “The ethical, egalitarian voice of Islam... speaks most clearly and insistently... It is because Muslim women hear this egalitarian voice that they often declare... that Islam is nonsexist” (p. 239). Through Sammar, Aboulela embodies this principle, demonstrating that Islamic devotion

offers more than spiritual comfort; it provides a moral ground through which Sammar navigates the dislocations of exile. Her religious identity acts as a living, affective, and intellectually grounded site of self-definition, resisting the notion of nostalgic retreat. Islam is repositioned within diasporic literature as a dynamic framework for negotiating meaning, grounding loss, and articulating moral selfhood in a secular world that frequently misreads piety as passivity.

Sammar's religious consciousness establishes her visible presence in public life rather than leading to withdrawal. She neither seeks assimilation into a secular public sphere nor validation through cultural conformity. Instead, she inhabits her Islamic identity visibly and unapologetically. One of the clearest expressions of this commitment is evident in her practice of praying in public spaces: "She was used to praying in the middle of parties, in places where others chatted... But she was aware now... how surprised people would be were they to turn the corner... and find someone with their forehead, nose and palms touching the ground" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 75). The details of the body here are important: the forehead, nose, and palms touching the ground make prayer concrete, physical, and publicly visible. Sammar's awareness of possible surprise does not stop her from praying; instead, it shows that her devotion remains steady even when it may be misread by others. This embodied act of prayer unsettles dominant cultural assumptions by enacting norm-guided self-formation, a concept Saba Mahmood (2005) captures when she explains that "Agency... may consist not in resisting norms but in inhabiting them in a particular way" (p. 15). Sammar's faith reflects a way of knowing and living that she consciously embraces.

In a similar vein, Md. Mahmudul Hasan critiques the tendency to dismiss Muslim women's religious commitments as misguided, noting that their conscious choice to wear the hijab is often reduced to a form of "false consciousness" (Hasan, 2018). He highlights how such views rest on the assumption that, once Muslim women are exposed to so-called enlightened or Western norms, they would willingly abandon practices like the veil. These perceptions assume that others know what is best for Muslim women, disregarding their capacity for moral and spiritual self-determination. Such a dismissive outlook, as critiqued by Hasan, fails to recognise the intentionality behind Sammar's practices. Her decisions to veil, to pray, and to refuse a secular marriage are not capitulations to social pressure but acts of chosen commitment. Her testimony, "It's two things together, both beginning with the words, 'I bear witness'... to something that is intangible, invisible, but I have knowledge of it in my heart" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 123), articulates a form of spiritual knowing that anchors her moral subjectivity. The wording is significant: Sammar says "I bear witness," not simply "I believe," so faith is presented as testimony, knowledge, and accountability. Her reference to knowledge "in my heart" also gives belief an inward certainty that cannot be measured by secular proof. Likewise, her relationship with the Qur'an is framed as an emotional and aesthetic encounter alongside its doctrinal significance: "The Qur'an was the miracle... still with us now... When the early verses... were recited, many people were crying from the words and how they sounded" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 124). Here, the Qur'an is not treated only as a text of instruction; it is heard, felt, and received through sound. This helps explain why Sammar's faith works through beauty and affect as well as through law and belief. These moments reveal Islam as a source of beauty, conviction, and emotional depth, shaping a living structure for moral selfhood. Amina Wadud's (1999) assertion that "The moral and religious equality of the sexes before God represents the highest expression of the value of equality" (p. 100) reinforces the notion that embodied religiosity fully coexists with agency, dignity, and feminist subjectivity.

This intersection between spiritual devotion and feminist agency finds further theoretical grounding in Nego-feminism, an African feminist paradigm that values moral discernment, relational harmony, and negotiation. As articulated by Obioma Nnaemeka (2004),

Nego-feminism privileges negotiated, relationship-preserving action and resists ego-driven confrontation, emphasising ethical restraint and communal responsibility (pp. 360–361). Sammar’s commitment to faith, her visible enactment of prayer, and her insistence on religious integrity within her relationships exemplify a nego-feminist sensibility. Her agency develops through careful judgement and self-restraint, closely aligned with Nnaemeka’s account of negotiated, context-attuned gains that preserve spiritual and relational integrity (2004, p. 361). This framing gains further resonance considering Aboulela’s Sudanese background, where Islamic and African feminist traditions converge. Sammar’s journey illustrates a model of agency, articulated through persistent resilience and religious steadiness rather than through secular confrontation.

The personal dimensions of Sammar’s moral framework are most poignantly tested in her relationship with Rae Isles, where emotional intimacy confronts spiritual boundaries. Though emotionally compatible and intellectually stimulating, Rae’s secular worldview introduces a deeper moral discord that Sammar cannot overlook. Their bond challenges the idea that intercultural or interfaith hybridity alone is sufficient for relational harmony. Sammar’s sorrow at Rae’s unbelief is not rooted in cultural bias or spiritual superiority, but in a deeply felt dissonance: “Never in her life had anyone she cared about been an unbeliever... It was unbearable to think that Rae was so unaware” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 94). The force of the sentence lies in the word “unbearable,” which presents difference not as abstract theology but as emotional pain. Sammar does not reject Rae as a foreigner or as a Westerner; what troubles her is the spiritual distance between affection and belief. The phrase “so unaware” also suggests that unbelief, for Sammar, is not merely another position but a condition of loss and danger that Rae himself cannot see. This emotional rupture underscores the limits of hybridity when spiritual convictions are non-negotiable. In this sense, the scene accords with Bhabha’s account of hybridity as a site where “antagonistic or contradictory elements” are articulated rather than dissolved (Bhabha, 1994, p. 25). Sammar’s eventual decision to walk away does not signify emotional failure; rather, it marks a reaffirmation of her moral integrity and spiritual selfhood. By prioritising divine accountability over romantic resolution, she asserts that hybridity, for her, must honour religious conviction as well as emotional attachment. In this light, the personal becomes political, revealing that faith is not an obstacle to self-actualisation but a principle through which identity, agency, and relational boundaries are formed.

Cultural Hybridity and Diasporic Experience

Aboulela’s *The Translator* presents diasporic identity as a difficult process of living between places without losing religious orientation, challenging celebratory notions of hybridity as cultural fusion. As a Sudanese widow in Aberdeen, Sammar experiences her new context as emotionally and spiritually dissonant. Her alienation is captured vividly: “The houses didn’t have carpets and the people didn’t have souls” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 10). The sentence reduces Aberdeen to absence: no carpets, no warmth, and, more painfully, “no souls.” Sammar’s language therefore turns material unfamiliarity into spiritual estrangement, showing that displacement is felt through the body, the home, and the inner life at once. Avtar Brah’s (1996, p.16) concept of “diaspora space,” where identities intersect and compete, illuminates this struggle; however, for Sammar, hybridity involves far more than shifting affiliations. It demands a way of remaining inwardly steady while moving through emotional uncertainty. Her quiet return to prayer, even in moments of hesitation, signals not regression but reorientation. Caught between Sudan and Scotland, Sammar experiences belonging as emotionally suspended: “Outside, Sammar stepped into a hallucination... Home had come here... But this was Scotland and the reality left her dulled” (Aboulela, 1999, pp. 20–21). The word “hallucination” is significant because it makes home appear both present and unreal.

Sammar briefly sees Sudan in Scotland, but the recognition collapses as soon as reality returns. Belonging, then, is not simply a matter of location; it is a fragile emotional experience shaped by memory, loss, and spiritual longing. Bureaucratic identities, “religion, country of origin, race... data that fills forms” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 34), further flatten her subjectivity. Her anxiety about returning to Khartoum, “all she had now was reluctance and some fear” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 98), suggests that hybridity is neither resolved through assimilation nor restored by return. Instead, it is negotiated inwardly, anchored in faith and self-awareness.

Sammar’s profession as a translator becomes a central metaphor for her way of living between worlds. Translation demands balance, care, and fidelity, all of which mirror the internal processes by which she mediates between Islamic faith and secular modernity. Her translation of Al-Nidaa’s manifesto exposes her to ideological complexity and human fragility: “The document was handwritten... full of spelling mistakes... stained with tea and... beans mashed with oil” (Aboulela, 1999, pp. 5–6). The details are deliberately ordinary and even untidy: handwriting, spelling mistakes, tea stains, and food marks. These traces make the document feel human rather than abstract, reminding the reader that translation is not only the transfer of ideas but also an encounter with lived struggle, error, and vulnerability. Yet Sammar chooses not to erase these imperfections, just as she does not erase the tension between her spiritual convictions and her external reality. Translation becomes a moral act, one through which hybridity is neither mimicry nor compromise but deliberate interpretation across boundaries. Her sacred language reinforces this conscience-shaped attention. In prayer and *dhikr*, she finds coherence: “When she finished praying, she sat for the tasbeeh... I seek forgiveness from Allah...” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 37). The movement from translation work to tasbeeh suggests that Sammar’s mediation between languages is held together by a deeper rhythm of remembrance. Her professional role places her between Arabic and English, but her devotional practice prevents that in-betweenness from becoming spiritual dislocation. These acts are not mechanical but restorative, cultivating inner stillness amid outer disorder. She maintains a visible religious identity even in unfamiliar settings, as when “She was used to praying in the middle of parties... She wondered how Rae would feel...” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 75), thereby establishing continuity across geographies. Through sacred Arabic, she carries a portable religious world of meaning that affirms her identity in the face of displacement.

The limits of Bhabha’s Third Space theory become clear through Sammar’s experience. Bhabha imagines hybridity as a zone “where cultural meaning and representation have no primordial unity or fixity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 55), but Sammar’s faith provides a stable point of reference that prevents difference from becoming self-loss. She does not waver in her refusal of secular norms such as casual intimacy or alcohol, and her integrity is not contingent on context. Rae states, “I studied Islam for the politics of the Middle East” (Aboulela, 1999, p. 126), which underscores the epistemic distance between them. The phrasing reduces Islam, at least initially, to an object of academic and political study. Rae approaches it through knowledge, region, and expertise, whereas Sammar encounters it as worship, discipline, and daily orientation. He engages Islam intellectually; she lives it existentially. Sammar’s identity work is not about improvising between competing values but about preserving religious integrity while moving between spaces. Translation for her is not just linguistic but epistemic. Emily Apter observes that translation involves asymmetries of power and meaning; it is “fraught with unequal relations of knowledge and power” (Apter, 2006, p. 6). Aboulela uses this to frame translation as a form of survival, a means by which Sammar upholds spiritual meaning within systems that seek to flatten or secularise it. Her work preserves not only the words but the moral weight behind them.

Aboulela extends her critique of secular liberalism through the textures of Sammar's daily life. Aberdeen provides material ease but spiritual emptiness. Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity," where identities and commitments are transient, resonates with Sammar's unease in a world unanchored by belief (Bauman, 2000). Her decision to observe prayer, follow halal norms, and maintain modesty is not nostalgic retreat but a deliberate way of preserving orientation. Aboulela suggests that survival in diaspora depends on moral steadfastness, not cultural flexibility. Sammar's relationship with Rae embodies this boundary. While emotionally close, they remain theologically apart. Rae's admission, "It's not in me to be religious" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 126), reflects a rupture that affection cannot mend. The phrase "not in me" makes unbelief sound less like a temporary uncertainty than a limit within Rae's own sense of self. For Sammar, this matters because love cannot be separated from the religious ground on which a shared life would stand. Sammar's refusal to accept a superficial conversion reasserts that hybridity, for her, is not an emotional compromise. It requires moral alignment. Her strength lies in quiet clarity, in choosing conviction over convenience. Through Sammar, Aboulela redefines hybridity as a process of careful ethical negotiation rather than fluid adaptation, affirming a model of Arab-Muslim feminist agency rooted in coherence rather than erasure.

Gender, Power, and Intercultural Relationships

In *The Translator*, gender emerges as a dynamic site where emotional resilience, religious identity, and intercultural tension are continually negotiated. Aboulela resists binary frameworks that define Muslim women either as passive victims or as secular rebels. Through Sammar, the narrative carves out a third mode of agency, one anchored in faith, restraint, and self-knowledge. Sammar's grief over the death of her husband initiates a profound period of emotional and spiritual withdrawal: "She had lived four years as if home had been taken away from her in the same way Tarig had" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 7). The comparison between home and Tarig shows that Sammar's loss is not only marital but also spatial and existential. Tarig's death removes the emotional centre of her life, while exile makes that absence feel like the loss of a whole world. Her grief therefore becomes the condition through which gender, widowhood, migration, and faith are brought together. These lines reveal not only her depression but also her sense of cultural and emotional displacement. Yet even in isolation, her adherence to prayer signals that her agency continues internally through faith. Sammar's inward turn transforms grief into reflection and renewed religious commitment, offering an alternative to models of autonomy based on the abandonment of tradition. Lila Abu-Lughod's (2002) warning against feminism as a "new civilizing mission" that seeks to "save" Muslim women resonates deeply here. Sammar requires no rescue from Islam; instead, she embodies a faith-driven path toward healing and self-reclamation. Through the ethical intimacy of Sammar's inner life, Aboulela demonstrates a form of gendered agency that is contemplative, spiritually rooted, and quietly resistant to both patriarchy and secular liberalism.

Sammar's steadfastness becomes particularly visible in her relationship with Rae Isles, which Aboulela uses to explore how spiritual agency operates in an intercultural setting. Rae admires Sammar's composure and emotional depth, yet their orientations toward faith diverge. His engagement with Islam is largely academic; as he puts it, "I view the Qur'an as a sacred text... [but] I am not a Muslim," a stance that highlights the gap between scholarly respect and lived commitment (Aboulela, 1999, p. 89). The hesitation in Rae's statement is important. He can recognise the Qur'an's sacred status from a distance, but he stops short of entering the faith that gives it binding meaning for Sammar. The phrase "I am not a Muslim" therefore marks a boundary that admiration alone cannot cross. By contrast, Sammar's belief is embodied and non-negotiable. She makes faith the precondition for any shared life, raising the *shahādah*

explicitly as the term on which a future together would rest (Aboulela, 1999, p. 123). Although she desires love, she is unwilling to compromise religious integrity for attachment. Her calm refusal of a relationship lacking shared belief reframes feminist strength as deliberate, spiritually anchored, and resolved rather than performative. This approach aligns with Saba Mahmood's view that "the normative desire for freedom... should not be assumed a universal" (2005, p. 10) and supports reading Sammar's boundary-setting as agency exercised within religious norms rather than their rejection. Sammar's dignity lies in keeping kindness distinct from compatibility and in choosing clarity over capitulation.

This principled agency aligns closely with Islamic feminist ethics and reflects the principles of Nego-feminism, which emphasises negotiation, spiritual resilience, and relational accountability over direct confrontation. As Nnaemeka (2004) explains, Nego-feminism advances a negotiation-oriented, ego-decentred praxis that prioritises communal responsibility and context-attuned gains (pp. 360–361). Read through this lens, Sammar's decision to withdraw from a relationship that lacks theological coherence, her firm yet compassionate communication, and her unwavering commitment to prayer and principle operate as acts of careful moral choice rather than passive acceptance. Her agency privileges moral constancy and communal harmony while preserving integrity, challenging the assumption that liberation requires rejecting religious tradition. In this way, Aboulela crafts a feminist subjectivity that draws strength from both Islamic and African feminist traditions, yielding a model that is deeply ethical, reflective, and self-determining.

The tension between Sammar's embodied religiosity and Rae's secular detachment also plays out through the motif of language and translation. Sammar's work as a translator situates her between two worlds: Arabic and English, Islam and secular academia, emotional truth and scholarly abstraction. Her linguistic labour is profoundly personal, turning translation into an ethical negotiation rather than a mechanical linguistic exercise. Rae's praise, "Researchers would kill for something as grass-roots as this" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 161), reveals an extractive dynamic in which Islamic culture is treated as a research commodity. The phrase "would kill" carries a casual academic enthusiasm, but it also exposes how easily lived political and religious realities can be converted into research value. The word "grass-roots" further distances Rae from the people represented in the material, making their struggle appear useful because it is authentic, rare, and professionally valuable. Emily Apter's (2006) reminder that translation is "fraught with unequal relations of knowledge and power" (p. 6) becomes particularly relevant here. Sammar must navigate not only languages but entire worldviews without erasing their differences. Her fluency emerges as a form of resilience, preserving integrity amid epistemic asymmetry. Translation, for Sammar, mirrors her broader diasporic negotiation, allowing her to survive across cultural divides while remaining true to her religious and moral commitments.

Aboulela's portrayal of gendered agency remains inseparable from broader intersections of race, class, faith, and nationality. Sammar is not simply a Muslim woman in the West; she is a Black Arab widow, a single mother, and a devout believer operating within a predominantly white, secular institution. These overlapping identities intensify her marginalisation while sharpening her capacity to read power carefully. Rather than depicting her as defeated, Aboulela presents marginality as a source of critical clarity. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) insight that intersectionality reveals distinct epistemological perspectives proves particularly apt. Sammar's heightened awareness stems from the multiplicity of her experiences. Her refusal to compromise her belief system affirms her right to define herself through faith rather than through secular expectation. Viewed through a nego-feminist lens, her intersectionality becomes a site of strength, offering a vantage point from which the self is

negotiated carefully across unequal cultural, racial, and religious spaces_rather than through outward confrontation.

Throughout *The Translator*, Aboulela constructs a counter-narrative to dominant portrayals of intercultural relationships involving Muslim women and Western men. Although Sammar and Rae share emotional tenderness, their relationship cannot overcome theological divergence. Sammar's understanding of love is filtered through religious commitment and moral responsibility. Her refusal, expressed with neither bitterness nor dramatics, embodies the nego-feminist principle of asserting one's values through strategic moral clarity. In reframing liberation as loyalty to a higher moral order rather than detachment from tradition, she challenges Western liberal assumptions that happiness constitutes the highest good and feminist narratives that conflate autonomy with romantic freedom. Through Sammar, Aboulela affirms the right of Muslim women to define relationships on their own religious and emotional terms, without relinquishing the values that shape their lives. Sammar's choices, grounded in Islamic ethics and African feminist pragmatism, reflect a nuanced vision of gendered agency: quiet, principled, and unwavering.

Narrative Voice and Spiritual Form

In *The Translator*, Aboulela constructs a narrative voice shaped by Islamic spiritual rhythm, departing from Western conventions of linear transformation. Sammar's journey unfolds through silence, memory, and private rituals rather than dramatic events. The novel opens in winter fog, framing Sammar's grief as both environmental and spiritual: "Last year when the city had been dark with fog, she hid indoors for four days, eating her way through the last packet of pasta in the cupboard, drinking tea without milk" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 1). The opening image is deliberately plain: fog, indoors, pasta, and tea without milk. These ordinary details show grief as bodily and domestic rather than heroic or dramatic. Sammar's withdrawal is not presented as weakness, but as a state of suspended life in which even eating and drinking become signs of emotional depletion. This stillness evokes *khalwa* (spiritual retreat) and reflects a sacred pause embedded in Islamic epistemology, where silence precedes revelation. Aboulela's narrative structure mirrors this understanding, replacing secular urgency with cycles of remembrance and reflection. Sammar's spiritual return is marked by deliberate reorientation toward God, prayer, and ethical consciousness. The novel challenges dominant expectations of plot-driven arcs, offering instead a Qur'anic aesthetic where moral reorientation defines transformation. Aboulela foregrounds a model of female agency rooted in faith, coherence, and sustained resilience, demonstrating that empowerment can arise through spiritual deliberation rather than through rupture.

The narrative structure of *The Translator* subtly echoes Qur'anic intertextuality, not only through embedded verses but through deeper rhythmic and epistemological patterns. Aboulela moves away from the linear, cause-and-effect trajectory common to Western narratives, crafting instead a reflective circularity that mirrors the Qur'anic mode of repetition, moral testing, and spiritual return. Sammar's journey is characterised by gradual ethical reawakening through loss, remembrance, and faith, aligned with the Qur'anic rhythm where spiritual insight emerges through cycles of trial and reflection. Her solitary recitation of al-Fatiha, "All praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all the worlds..." (Aboulela, 1999, p. 74), functions as both a devotional expression and a narrative invocation, framing her spiritual turning point with the cadence of revelation. The recitation matters because it occurs when Sammar is alone and emotionally unsettled; the familiar words do not remove grief, but they organise it. Through this moment, Aboulela allows prayer to shape narrative movement from within Sammar's consciousness. Likewise, her repeated utterance of *Astaghfir Allah* during Ramadan (Aboulela, 1999, p. 174) and her invocation of the *shahadah* in her reflection on

belief (Aboulela, 1999, p. 123) embed Qur'anic formulae within her emotional and moral arc. These invocations form a textual *dhikr*, aligning the reader's experience of her inner life with the aesthetic rhythm of sacred remembrance. Aboulela refrains from over-explaining these references, maintaining their religious intimacy and inviting readers to engage with them on their own terms. Through this technique, she enacts Qur'anic intertextuality not only through citation but through structure, rhythm, and spiritual epistemology, offering a literary model that challenges secular narrative paradigms and affirms faith-based coherence as a legitimate form of storytelling. This supports the central claim that *The Translator* reconfigures literary form to reflect faith-based subjectivity, where Qur'anic intertextuality and introspective rhythm become tools of ethical and aesthetic resistance.

Aboulela's narrative technique integrates Islamic epistemologies by privileging sacred stillness and inward cultivation over external spectacle. During Sammar's solitary Ramadan observance in Aberdeen, she reflects: "Then she drank the water and felt herself to be simple, someone with a simple need, easily fulfilled, easily granted. The dates and the water made her heart feel big, with no hankering or tanginess or grief" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 173). The simplicity of water and dates is central to the scene. Sammar's need is small, but its fulfilment enlarges the heart; the language moves from physical thirst to emotional spaciousness. The absence of "hankering" and "grief" suggests that fasting does not deny desire but disciplines it until the self becomes quieter and more receptive. This private moment of *iftar*, stripped of communal festivity, embodies the Qur'anic ethic of simplicity and gratitude. Her recitation, "*Astaghfir Allah, Astaghfir Allah... the twenty-ninth time, thirty...*" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 174), echoes the practice of *dhikr*, in which repetition purifies and deepens moral awareness. The counted repetition gives the sentence a ritual rhythm. It slows the narrative down and allows repentance to become both an inward act and a formal pattern in the prose. What might outwardly appear as passivity becomes an act of deliberate spiritual cultivation. In contrast to Western feminist paradigms that associate agency with visible rebellion, Sammar's agency emerges through intentional spiritual deliberation. As Amina Wadud (1999) asserts, "Submission in Islam is not servitude but a conscious moral choice" (p. 100). Through this lens, Sammar's empowerment arises not through spectacle but through steady religious intention, presenting an alternative vision of feminist strength rooted in faith.

One of Aboulela's most significant narrative strategies is her refusal to translate Islamic spirituality into secular legibility. Islamic practices are neither exoticised nor explained for an external audience; they are portrayed as internalised and lived realities. When Sammar breaks her fast alone on Christmas Day, the narration offers no cross-cultural commentary: "Thirty-five minutes past three and Sammar ate a date that tasted even sweeter because she was breaking a fast" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 173). The sentence is striking because of its restraint. It gives the exact time, the simple act of eating a date, and the quiet sweetness of worship without turning the moment into cultural explanation. The reference to Christmas Day also sharpens Sammar's solitude, yet the scene does not present her as deprived; instead, the fast gives the ordinary date a fuller emotional and spiritual meaning. Faith operates as a lived grammar of feeling and perception rather than as an anthropological curiosity. This approach disrupts dominant diasporic trends where religious practices are often mediated for secular consumption. Emily Apter's (2006) insight that "translation can obscure asymmetries of knowledge and experience" (p. 9) is particularly relevant. Aboulela resists flattening sacred experience for accessibility, preserving the complexity and integrity of Islamic subjectivity. Sammar's repeated *Astaghfir Allah* is performed as sacred rhythm rather than presented as symbolic ornament. Through this narrative strategy, Aboulela offers theological realism, allowing prayer, fasting, and remembrance to structure emotional and existential realities.

Narrative rhythm itself becomes an enactment of spiritual movement, collapsing the artificial divide between form and content.

Sammar's voice functions as a counter-discourse to Orientalist representations that frame Muslim women as voiceless or submissive. Rather than dismantling stereotypes through overt confrontation, Aboulela rewrites them from within, using subtle irony, emotional restraint, and principled discernment. Sammar rarely raises her voice, but her decisions, anchored in faith and conscience, resonate with moral force. When Rae suggests she participate in anti-terrorism discourse work in Cairo, she replies with quiet sarcasm: "You imagine that I can interview terrorists?" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 149), a refusal that rejects complicity in narratives that distort her faith. The question is short, but it exposes the absurdity of Rae's assumption. Sammar's "you imagine" gently turns the gaze back on him, revealing how easily her identity can be recruited into political narratives about Islam. Her refusal is therefore not loud resistance, but a clear rejection of a role that would make her faith and background useful to someone else's agenda. Her relationship with Rae follows the same arc: although emotionally drawn to him, she refuses to compromise her convictions. Through narrative posture and characterisation, Aboulela denies the reader voyeuristic access to Sammar's inner spirituality, reclaiming narrative authority by allowing faith to shape both voice and agency without requiring external validation.

Aboulela's narrative form privileges cyclicity, interiority, and spiritual return over secular ideals of climax and rupture. In Islamic tradition, the journey toward God (*raj'a*) is structured by repetition, remembrance, and ethical striving rather than linear progression. Sammar's trajectory mirrors this sacred rhythm. Her return to Khartoum and her renewed sense of home are framed through metaphysical realignment rather than triumphant resolution: "She had lived four years as if home had been taken away from her in the same way Tarig had. To see home again. It was a chandelier on the ceiling of her life, circles of lights" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 172). The image of the chandelier is gentle but powerful. Home is not presented as a complete solution to grief; instead, it appears as light returning to the ceiling of her life, suggesting beauty, order, and partial illumination after years of darkness. The "circles of lights" also echo the section's concern with repetition and return, making Sammar's recovery feel circular rather than simply progressive. The imagery evokes the meditative spiral of *dhikr*, suggesting that the narrative itself becomes an act of sacred remembrance. *The Translator* adapts the tradition of spiritual and moral cultivation into English fiction, portraying silence, repetition, and discernment as central dimensions of faith-shaped agency. Through this form, Aboulela challenges secular literary conventions, proposing that coherence, growth, and resilience emerge through spiritual rhythms rather than through rupture. Sammar's agency, shaped through submission to divine will, moves beyond simple binaries of liberation and oppression, offering an alternative model of subjectivity grounded in moral constancy.

Taken together, Aboulela's narrative voice constitutes an important challenge to dominant literary paradigms. *The Translator* interrogates secular imperatives that associate agency with resistance and liberation with rupture, offering instead a narrative structure rooted in Islamic epistemology. Sammar's silences, ethical refusals, and spiritual reflections compose a voice shaped by religious meaning and moral restraint. As Mahmood asserts, "The ability to inhabit norms is not opposed to agency but is the condition of its enactment" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 1). In *The Translator*, faith is not a decorative background; it constitutes the very architecture of narrative subjectivity. Through the alignment of form and spirit, Aboulela redefines literary agency, allowing Muslim women's subjectivity to emerge from within sacred epistemologies. The novel thus stands as both a literary and a theoretical intervention, offering a sustained model of ethical and spiritual subjectivity within contemporary literature.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* reconceptualises hybridity, diasporic negotiation, and female agency through a framework rooted in Islamic ethics. Aboulela challenges dominant secular and postcolonial assumptions that define agency through rupture, resistance, or assimilation. Sammar's journey affirms a model of subjectivity shaped by religious commitment, moral reflection, and inward steadiness. Her acts of prayer, remembrance, and moral discernment are not nostalgic or regressive. They function as resilient strategies for inhabiting dislocated spaces, reasserting dignity and purpose amid fragmentation. Aboulela thus reframes the diasporic experience as a field in which religious selfhood can remain active, reflective, and responsive to changing cultural conditions.

In reimagining belonging through faith, Aboulela also transforms narrative structure. Reflection, repetition, and spiritual return replace rupture and transformation as markers of growth. By embedding sacred temporality within the novel's form, she unsettles literary conventions that prioritise confrontation or assimilation. Sammar's agency emerges not through rebellion, but through careful negotiation shaped by faith and responsibility. In rejecting reductive portrayals of Muslim women as either victims or rebels, Aboulela offers an alternative literary aesthetic, one rooted in introspection, continuity, and spiritual rhythm. The novel becomes both a personal story and a critique of narrative forms that sideline faith as a mode of knowing.

By intertwining faith, gender, migration, and form, *The Translator* proposes a distinctive way of reading hybridity and agency in Aboulela's fiction. This approach privileges coherence over fragmentation and inward strength over performative rebellion. Spiritually grounded negotiation resists both liberal secular models of emancipation and rigid traditionalism. Aboulela's novel affirms that Islamic spirituality is not peripheral to diasporic identity but central to its principled and aesthetic formation. It offers a clear challenge to dominant assumptions about postcolonial subjectivity, expanding how Arab-Muslim women's agency and subjectivity can be theorised, narrated, and understood beyond secular and homogenising frames of postcolonial critique. While this article has focused on a single novel, its reading of *The Translator* may open further avenues for future research on diasporic narratives in which religious ethics shape gendered agency, belonging, and intercultural negotiation.

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