

**I. Laheg***Azerbaijan University of Languages**Baku, Azerbaijan* <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3048-5213>email: [inas.laheg@adu.edu.az](mailto:inas.laheg@adu.edu.az)**THE POLITICS OF ALIENATION IN LEILA ABOULELA'S  
“THE TRANSLATOR”**

**Abstract.** This article analyzes the sense of alienation and unhomeliness experienced by Muslim immigrants in Europe through an analysis of Leila Aboulela's first novel, “The Translator.” Particular attention is paid to biographical details of the author and their influence on the formation of her personal identity. Employing a descriptive-analytical approach, the study foregrounds the theoretical contributions of postcolonial critics such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon. The novel is examined as a socio-political space in which Eurocentric imperialism marginalizes diasporic communities to the periphery of the metropolitan center. The article also explores phenomena of temporal disorientation and detachment from the present that accompany the immigrant experience in conditions of exile. The author shows how the protagonist withdraws from the present and retreats into the past, which functions as a psychological refuge from the hardships of displacement. Such withdrawal, as the author argues, is interpreted as a consequence of the immigrant's inability to envision a viable future within a hostile host society.

**Keywords:** alienation; Muslim immigrant; postcolonial critics; temporal disorientation; unhomeliness.

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**Introduction**

Contact zones such as diaspora spaces and immigrant societies in the West have spilled much ink, as they usually position discordant, conflicting, and hostile ideologies near at hand. The cultural, social, and political interaction between those who claim ownership of the place under the pretext of nationalism and the foreigners who are paving their way to occupy a functional role within it provokes extensive postcolonial criticism. As the immigrants try to partake in a practical social role within their new environment, the European becomes engrossed in a constant confirmation of his/her sovereignty over the space and tightens his/her fist over the singularity of such an ownership (Ashcroft et al., 2013; Bhabha, 2004; Morey, 2018; Codebò, 2020).

Immigration usually entails the reshaping of the immigrated to space, which could be remarked in the building of new, unusual religious places and the celebration of foreign cultural ceremonies, where access to the so-called owner of the space becomes unlikely in certain incompatible places. Space becomes remapped culturally, where legally available spaces become socially inaccessible and culturally restricted. Likewise, mainstream media and political tensions between countries channel the immigrants' spatial movement and map the host country into wanted and unwanted spaces. An exemplar of such politics is the Muslim immigrant in Western countries after the 11/9 event. The immigrant finds him/herself in situations of perpetual cultural compromising and political renunciation (Felluga, 2015; Morey, 2018).

The pinning of Islam as a prototype for terrorism, women's oppression, and aberrant anti-democratic conventions by the Western media has predated the 9/11 event. The Orient has long been conceived as an epitome of the exotic 'other' that is antagonistic with all that Christian Latinity denotes. The political backwash that parties and politicians have weaponized has hitherto alienated and marginalized the Muslim diaspora. They were no longer viewed through the prism of cultural or economic aspects pertinent to the societal norms. They were relegated to a reductive view, where Islam embodies violence and cultural degradation (Said, 1984, as cited in Chambers, 2017; Chaoui, 2023; Behera, 2023).

Accordingly, such a tussle has long been imported into the writing of the Anglophone Muslim diaspora. Salient in Anglophone Arab literature in the UK over the last few decades, aside from the political tone, is the protrusion of the female pen and the feminist discourse (Al Maleh, 2009). Notwithstanding the alienation and marginalization endured, undeniable for the inhabitants of the borderlines is the unrestrained, detached, and cross-cultural standpoint that such dynamic spaces grant. The crossroads of in-betweenness, seemingly, conferred an escape route for such narratives to be voiced. Nonetheless, Western tropes of Muslim women as helpless subjects in need of saving and liberation serve as a roadblock for the maintenance of genuine discourse.

This study aims to investigate the politics of unhomeliness and alienation in Leila Aboulela's "The Translator" through the lens of postcolonial theory, with particular attention to the author's biographical context and its influence on her representation of displacement. The research seeks to demonstrate how Aboulela's narrative constructs a psychological geography of exile, in which temporal dislocation and nostalgia operate as coping mechanisms for the loss of belonging. By employing a descriptive analytical method alongside postcolonial criticism, the study endeavors to elucidate the intricate interplay between identity, religion, and space that shapes the experience of Muslim immigrants in Western societies.

### **Materials and Methods**

The main corpus of analysis of this research study is narrowed down to the Sudanese author's novel, "The Translator," which was published by Black Cat in 1999 in New York. Numerous excerpts from the novel were employed as textual evidence and exemplars of the protagonist's state of unhomeliness, alienation, and temporal distortion. Apparently, this article revolves mainly around a singular character, which is the heroine, Sammar. Since a displaced woman has written "The Translator" and is simultaneously telling the story of another displaced woman, the analysis apparently focuses on the female version of experiences of displacement and uprootedness.

The factual corpus of the research consists of selected textual excerpts from “The Translator” that vividly depict the protagonist’s experiences of exile, nostalgia, and psychological dislocation. These passages serve as primary evidence for the descriptive analysis and allow the study to ground its postcolonial interpretations in concrete narrative situations rather than abstract theorization.

However, in addition to the protagonist, the analysis does not stray away from the author’s background and surrounding cultural environment. In fact, extracts, and citations from the author’s interviews and essays provided genuine research materials for explaining and decoding the fictional event of the novel. As a result, the interplay and interaction between the author’s personal life and her novel dissolved the thin yet dim veil separating the author from her creation. Parallels and liaisons were drawn between the author’s reality and her handcrafted fiction, abridging and deciphering the essence and the implicit messages of this fictional content.

The article relied heavily on descriptive analytical methods. Textual materials were descriptively extracted and positioned side by side with theoretically postcolonial analytical contextualization. Such critical juxtapositioning created a nexus between cultural, psychological, and literary studies. Postcolonialism served as the principal lens of literary criticism. It facilitated eviscerating imperial and Eurocentric maxims. At the same time, it promotes a decolonial historical perspective. Conspicuously, the subversive division of the dominant metropolis and the dominated periphery is challenged through the voicing of underrepresented minorities. Espousing the comments of scholars such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said with Aboulela’s narrative unearths unprecedented layers of ideological and political indications.

### **Results and Discussion**

Having a target audience mainly from the host country, diasporic writers are supposed to supply images of Arab Muslim women that sell and appeal to the Western mainstream, in rhythm with the erroneous yet indelible impressions of the Eastern veiled agentless females. Their narratives and ideological stances never escape the straightforward and reductive inference of the West and East binarism. In the ongoing maze, diasporic writers are often alienated and mainly fall into the trap of becoming native informants, styling models of female protagonists in the escapee mode (Abdel-Fattah, 2017; Aldalala’a & Nash, 2017; Santesso, 2013; Aboulela, 2002).

Amongst diasporic Anglophone Muslim writers, the Sudanese author Leila Aboulela rose to fame by the dawn of the twenty-first century as an advocate for the Muslim immigrant woman in the West. The heroines of her novels and short stories are mostly displaced characters. Unsurprisingly, Aboulela herself has been an immigrant to over four countries. Her first experience abroad led her to Aberdeen, Scotland. Nostalgia and homesickness inspired the Sudanese writer to start her first novel, “The Translator,” which was later followed by five others. Aboulela’s top-rated novels and collections of short stories earned her numerous nominations and awards, to name a few, the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000, the Saltire Fiction Book of the Year Award in 2018, and the PEN Pinter Prize in 2025. The works of the widely acclaimed author are now translated into around fifteen languages (Aboulela, 2023b; Aboulela, 2007; Aboulela, 2023a).

Over twenty-five years later, “The Translator” still acts as a time-defying manuscript, representative of contemporary Muslims’ struggles regardless of the

political, economic, and social changes. “The Translator” chronicles the life story of a Sudanese immigrant, Sammar, who went to Scotland with her husband, who is her cousin, and was pursuing a medical degree. After a few months of the spouse’s ownership of a car, they crashed in a fatal accident. Sammar and her son, Amir, four years old, survived. Unfortunately, the husband, Tarig, was not equally lucky. Sammar, who went back to Sudan to bury her husband, left her son Amir, with his grandmother, Mahasen. After the traumatic event, Sammar was very much alive as well. She has cut off her son emotionally and lost her awareness of time. Over the years, she befriended a colleague at the university, who was hated for siding with Muslim and Eastern political interests. Hereinafter, the story takes a new turn and unveils an awakening of consciousness and spirituality (Aboulela, 2005b).

Identity construction, Aboulela clarifies, is rooted more in religious affiliation as a component force than in national attachment, from which she has been uprooted as an immigrant. Leila Aboulela crafts hybrid protagonists that are neither conforming to the East’s rigidity nor bending to the West’s impositions. Estranged protagonists that are inhabiting both spheres yet fitting in neither. Indeed, aspects of alienation are the quintessence of Aboulela’s novels. Densely cultivated is in her first work, “The Translator,” where the protagonist, straddling between the West and the East, the secular and the religious, decisively rearranges the puzzle pieces of her identity (Aboulela, 2005a).

Germane to racial and ideological liaisons, the sense of exclusion within the Arab Muslim diaspora is of a postcolonial relevance. Analogous to the Muslim diaspora’s alienation is Fanon’s elucidation of the white man’s artifact of the black soul as a fitting piece of colonial binarism, inter alia, the supreme white and the inferior black (Fanon, 2008). Likewise, the Arab Muslim in Europe is yet another motif of binary opposites set, herein: the civilized Western and the terrorist Eastern.

The fragmentation and the objectification of the black man from his skin, as an inescapable derogatory prison, is parallel to the de-individualizing practices directed towards the Eastern ‘other’ by the West, as a potential terrorist due to particular ideological affiliations. Henceforth, the captivity of subjects into a perpetual yet unattainable pursuit, dooms them to self-estrangement and social alienation from a perceivably antagonistic surrounding. Just as the black negro ‘lives an ambiguity that is extraordinarily neurotic’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 169), the Anglophone Arab Muslim diasporic subject shuffles in an equivocal self-articulation and labyrinth of irreconcilable loyalties and vague belonging.

### **1. Politics of Alienation and Unhomeliness**

Common to Anglo-Arab diaspora writing are the dense passages of unhomey images and the aspects of alienation. Unprecedented in Aboulela’s narrative in “The Translator” is the multi-angular screening of devout and practicing female Muslim encounters with the West. Sammar, who has regarded her religion as rather a safe anchor throughout her wandering in an unwelcoming environment, has been a target of stereotypical and de-individualizing practices. Muslims in general and Arabs in particular have become, as Pickens posits, “highly visible as objects of fear” (2009, p. 9, as cited in Arnsperger, 2017, p. 217).

In this regard, the hyper-visibility of Muslims rendered their very personhood invisible. Their individuality and subjectivity are dismissed and rather masqueraded with totalizing phobic images. Veil and prayers as religious indicators have become instigators of de-individualizing practices (Arnsperger, 2017). Sammar’s recounting of Yasmin’s story of the Turkish passengers in the airport is a case in point:

“If she stood up and prayed in the corner, people would have a fit. A story once told by Yasmin: Turks in London praying in Terminal 1 and someone called the police. Sammar prayed where she was, sitting down, not moving.” (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 95).

Sammar’s sitting still is a reminder of her being an unfit and discordant piece in the UK’s cultural mosaic. Her identification as a Muslim is limiting her presence and dismissing her functionality. In exile, Sammar is coexisting with the fact that she must shrink to fit in the exclusively available social molds and never occupy an extent of space that might personify her existence as a Muslim.

The fact that one wrong word and the terrorist barbarian person she envisaged might be disclosed loomed large in Sammar’s encounters with people around her. She is a target of constant supervision and detection, in this exile, “when she spoke to people, they seemed wary, on their guard as if any minute she would say something out of place, embarrassing” (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 3). On their guard, for she was perceived as a lurking danger, a plausible terrorist in disguise. She was the walking embodiment of the bombs, hijacks, and assassinations the media had streamed. Her words, gestures, and intentions have always been levelled to a different dimension: “Surprise was part of the city, ... There were shades of surprise: surprise-sneer, surprise-embarrassed, and surprise-bemused, surprise-disapproving. She had to be silent” (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 31).

Her scarf, as an article of faith, transcended the symbolic representation of religious dedication into a politicized code shunning her personhood. She is not a mother, a widow, or a translator. She is the spokeswoman of Saddam Hussein, terrorist groups, and all the stereotypes attached to the Arab countries. Worse still, during the Gulf War, suddenly, people became conscious that she was a Muslim. Her existence became blatant and observed. “Once a man shouted at her in King Street, Saddam Hussein, Saddam Hussein” (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 71). As her religious and ideological affiliations became hypervisible, Sammar, the human, was on the wane. Islam eclipsed and devoured her individuality and outweighed her personhood. People felt entitled to dispossess her humanity and project her villainy.

Such exclusion has remarkably been internalized and implicitly led its way into normality in Sammar’s unconsciousness and seeped into her perception of herself. The hostility her surroundings reflect has become justifiable. By default, she must deter their suspicion and maintain their approval by cutting, trimming, and disciplining herself, “[i]t had seemed strange for her when she first came to live here, all that privacy that surrounded praying... But she was aware now, after having lived in this city for many years she could understand, how surprised people would be ...” (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 53–54).

Sammar simply shrinks inward, into herself. In the coercive retreat, she was taken aback by nostalgic replaying and gradually held captive to memories redolent of images of a formerly warm and tender home. Nostalgic replaying that lavished inclusion and collectivity offered a shelter from a space that denied her a social permit, “Yet like the elderly who remember the distant past more clearly than the events of the previous day, Sammar lived with a young Tarig inside her head” (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 16). Sammar’s escapism falls in line with Eisenbruch’s notes on the uprooted subjects dwelling in past experiences and being haunted by supernatural encounters that are triggered in their dreams and wakefulness (1991, as cited in Bhugra & Becker, 2005).

## **2. Temporal Disassociation/Alienation**

Sammar, in numerous incidents, has experienced an overlapping and a merging of Sudan’s dim lights and dirty streets with those of Scotland. The exiled subjects, Eisenbruch

adds, bear a guilt and regret for deserting the country of origin and dedicate their life to enliven memories and preserve them from evanescence (1991, as cited in Bhugra & Becker, 2005). In guard against oblivion, Sammar has held still against the treacherous tide of time, “Since Tarig died she had not bought anything new. She had not noticed time moving past, the years eroding the clothes Tarig had seen her in, wools he had touched, colours he had given his opinion on” (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 47).

Sammar’s keeping household items untouched is a typical resort that confers the exiled subject with the illusion and solace of maintaining the warmth of previous life normality. She lost a homeland and a husband who catered homely sense in exile. All that is left for Sammar to preserve is the soulless aura and the insensible traces. Never wearing makeup again after Tarig’s death and keeping the same clothes is a way to relive and restore feelings she used to exchange with her husband, such as loyalty, love, and devotion, but the only form that remains to express such a range of emotions is through unhealthy, deformed practices. She has detached herself from her surroundings. The march of time in Sammar’s bleak house seems motionless: “Four years ill in a hospital she had made for herself. Ill, diseased with passivity, time in which she sat doing nothing. The whirlpool of grief sucking time. Hours flitting away like minutes” (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 10).

Loyalty to the past restrained Sammar’s ability from ‘presencing’, “she was heavy with other loyalties, full to the brim with distant places, voices” (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 20). Sammar’s negligence of the ‘now’ and the ‘here’ was to the extreme of being unaware of the food’s edibility and consuming it rotten, “There she saw the mouldy bread, cheese with fur and green, ... past its sell-by date”, Sammar had become in a complete detachment from the present, hypnotized by lures of the past, “For years, Sammar had eaten such food, ... as if there were a fog blocking her vision, a dreamy heaviness everywhere” (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 47). Dissociation from a society that centrifuges her nonconformity and dissonance has veiled her consciousness and robbed her of agency over her life. As Edward Said explains: “At this extreme the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments” (2000, p. 183).

The exiled subjects take shelter in solitude and temporariness that mars discursive exchange with their surroundings and further cements the grounds of unhomeliness. Said asserts, “To live as if everything around you were temporary and perhaps trivial is to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as to querulous lovelessness” (2000, p. 183). Similarly, Sammar lived in a kind of temporariness with no futuristic plans or premises to propel her forward.

The lack of a futuristic prospect that would keep her on track with the present and hence in sync with the forthcoming toppled Sammar downward into the abyss of the past. This way, Sammar was alienated from people in the exile, Aberdeen, for they belonged to the present. In the words of Lorenzo Casini, aspects of alienation in contemporary diasporic Arabs are embedded in their recurrent literary expression of “exclusion” and negation from national affinities and communal collectivities. Such an estrangement is firmly designated as ‘the impossibility for the characters to be active actors’ within their social milieu (2008, p. 7).

The exiled subjects, who are excluded and cornered in the world of memories and solitude, become enslaved to isolation and stagnation. Not only are they divorced from the present, but they also show no prospect of any futuristic aspirations. The lack

of attachment to a collectivity inhibits any plans for the future (Giri, 2023). Sammar's very stay in Aberdeen was a matter of feasibility rather than a sequel of planning or personal vision, and Aberdeen, in particular, has been singled out of commitment to old memories with her dead husband, Tarig. In addition, she had worked for some time at the university, and the chances of taking her back are hence high (2005b). Sammar settled with no intention of creating any lifelong bond or permanent resolution in Aberdeen. The sole time she pondered upon a futuristic decision, that is, remarrying, her destination was set on a man in Sudan, Am Ahmed. Sammar never imagined a functioning version of herself in Aberdeen.

### Conclusion

This research article draws heavily on Leila Aboulela's writing and philosophy of writing. In particular, her first novel, "The Translator," has been the fulcrum of analysis. The article has woven threads of the author's autobiographical details with her fictional storyline. Displacement is approached not only as a spatial phenomenon of disruption but simultaneously as a socio-political issue. Aboulela pictures the way the Muslim immigrant becomes a target of hate, discrimination, and dehumanization due to racial, cultural, and religious indications. She invests in the sense of homeliness that overwhelms the castaway immigrants, where they find themselves with a home that falls short of shielding them from the hostility of the surrounding environment.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study bears practical relevance for postcolonial and intercultural literary studies, as it offers an analytical framework for examining how narratives of displacement articulate the psychological and spatial conditions of Muslim immigrants in the West. The findings may further inform interdisciplinary approaches to diaspora literature, cultural identity, and cross-cultural communication.

The article has shed light on the temporal aspects of displacement and alienation. It zeroes in on the sense of temporal dissociation and reality detachment that engulfs the immigrant due to nostalgia and the mental replaying of memories. This study demonstrates the way the protagonist fled from the present moment altogether and resorted to the past as a safe refuge from the hostile exile. As a matter of fact, it becomes apparent that the inability of the immigrant to imagine a futuristic vision of him/herself in exile due to social exclusion divorces them from its presence.

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### ЛЕЙЛА АБУЛЕЛАНЫҢ «АУДАРМАШЫ» РОМАНЫНДАҒЫ ЖАТСЫНУ САЯСАТЫ

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада Еуропадағы мұсылман иммигранттарын жайлаған жатсыну мен үйсіздік сезімін Лейла Абулеланың алғашқы романы «Аудармашы» негізінде талдайды. Автордың өмірбаяндық деректері мен олардың шығармашылық тұлғасын қалыптастырудағы ықпалына ерекше назар аударылады. Бұл сипаттамалық-талдамалық зерттеу Эдвард Саид пен Франц Фанон сияқты постколониялық сыншылардың ғылыми үлесін алдыңғы қатарға шығарады. Роман еуроцентрлік империализм диаспоралық қауымдастықтарды метрополияның шеткері аймағына ығыстыратын әлеуметтік-саяси кеңістік ретінде қарастырылады. Мақалада сондай-ақ қуғын жағдайында иммигрантты қатар алып жүретін уақыттық бағдарсыздық пен қазіргі сәттен алшақтау құбылыстары қарастырылады. Автор кейіпкердің қазіргі өмірден толықтай бас тартып, өткенге шегінетінін көрсетеді; өткен оның үшін қуғынның қиындықтарынан психологиялық панаға айналады. Мұндай қашу, атап өтілгендей, иммигранттың жат әрі жау қабылдаушы қоғамда өміршең болашақты елестете алмауымен түсіндіріледі.

**Түйінді сөздер:** жатсыну; мұсылман иммигрант; постколониялық сыншылар; уақыттық бағдарсыздық; үйсіздік

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### ПОЛИТИКА ОТЧУЖДЕНИЯ В РОМАНЕ ЛЕЙЛЫ АБУЛЕЛЫ «ПЕРЕВОДЧИЦА»

**Аннотация.** В статье анализируется чувство отчуждения и неустроенности, охватывающее мусульманских иммигрантов в Европе, на материале первого романа Лейлы Абулелы «Переводчица». Особое внимание уделяется биографическим

деталям автора и тому, как они повлияли на формирование её личности. Это описательно-аналитическое исследование выдвигает на первый план вклад постколониальных критиков, таких как Эдвард Саид и Франц Фанон. Роман рассматривается как социополитическое пространство, где европоцентрический империализм вытесняет диаспоральные сообщества на периферию метрополии. В статье также рассматриваются явления временной дезориентации и отстранения от настоящего, которые сопровождают иммигранта в среде изгнания. Автор показывает, как героиня полностью отказывается от настоящего и уходит в прошлое, которое становится для неё психологическим убежищем от трудностей изгнания. Подобное бегство, как отмечается, обусловлено неспособностью иммигранта представить себе жизнеспособное будущее в недружелюбном принимающем обществе.

**Ключевые слова:** отчуждение; мусульманский иммигрант; постколониальные критики; временная дезориентация; неустроенность.