



## BORDER NEXUS AND MEDIUM: QUESTIONING CULTURAL IDENTITY AND EXPLORING THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING IN LEILA ABOULELA'S NOVEL "THE TRANSLATOR"

Yassine Hamdoune<sup>1</sup>, El Khairat<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Ibn Zohr University, Morocco

Email Corresponding: [hamdoune1yassine@gmail.com](mailto:hamdoune1yassine@gmail.com)

### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received 12/09, 2024

Revised 01/07, 2025

Accepted 01/14, 2025

#### Keywords:

Border Identity

Meaning

Cultural identification

Transnation

### Abstract

This paper examines Leila Aboulela's novel *The Translator*, focusing on the role of borders in constructing subjectivity and producing meanings within various cultural transformations. It demonstrates that the production of 'meaning' requires experiencing different types of borders. This produced 'meaning' as an outcome of huge cultural interactions between subjects within borders is significant because borders offer a space where these interactions take place. These interactions exhibit what Stewart Hall calls 'cultural identification'. The article summons Svend Erik Larsen's concept 'medium' while referring to this space and revealing the intricacies that encapsulate borders as practices. By focusing on symbolic borders, the paper goes throughout Aboulela's novel of *The Translator* to map how these borders are manifested and deployed to create new meanings within the different experiences of exile, displacement, and ambivalence. Since the novel is a reflection of the postcolonial era, the paper brings to view Bill Ashcroft's concept of 'the transnation' to underpin the certainty of openness, complexity, potentiality, and multiplicity, which constitute, not only 'the transnation', but also Larsen's understanding of 'the medium' and Schimanski and Wolfe's theory of borders. The conclusion underscores that the medium between physical and symbolic borders is a space where subjectivity goes through different forms of construction to produce new meanings.

### تجريد

تناول هذه الورقة البحثية رواية *The Translator* للكاتبة ليلى أبو العلا، مع التركيز على دور الحدود في تشكيل الذات وإنتاج المعاني ضمن التحولات الثقافية المختلفة. وتوضح هذه الورقة أن إنتاج "المعنى" يتطلب تجربة أنواع مختلفة من الحدود. وهذا "المعنى" المنتج، كنتيجة للتفاعلات الثقافية الواسعة بين الذوات داخل الحدود، ذو أهمية لأن الحدود توفر فضاءً تحدث فيه هذه التفاعلات. هذه التفاعلات تُظهر ما يسميه ستيفورث هول بـ "التحديد الثقافي". وتستدعي المقالة مفهوم "الوسيط" لسفيند إريك لارسن عند الإشارة إلى هذا الفضاء وكشف التعقيدات التي تجسد الحدود كمارسات. من خلال التركيز على الحدود الرمزية، تتعمق هذه الورقة في رواية *The Translator* لأبو العلا لرسم خارطة كيفية تجسد هذه الحدود واستخدامها في خلق معاني جديدة ضمن تجارب مختلفة من المنفى، والتزوج، والازدواجية. وبما أن الرواية تعكس حقبة ما بعد الاستعمار، تسلط الورقة الضوء على مفهوم "ما بعد الأمة" لبيل أشكروفت لتأكيد يقينية الانفتاح، والتعقيد، والإمكانات، والتعددية، وهي عناصر لا تشكل فقط "ما بعد الأمة"، بل أيضًا فهم لارسن لمفهوم "الوسيط" ونظرية الحدود لشيمنانيسكي وولف. وتؤكد الخاتمة أن "الوسيط" بين الحدود المادية والرمزية هو فضاء تمر فيه الذات بعمليات بناء مختلفة لإنتاج معاني جديدة.

### الكلمات المفتاحية :

هوية الحدود

المعنى

### Abstrak

Makalah ini mengkaji novel *The Translator* karya Leila Aboulela dengan menyoroti peran perbatasan dalam membentuk subjektivitas dan

الهوية الثقافية  
العابر للأمم

**Kata kunci:**

Identitas Perbatasan  
Makna  
Identifikasi budaya  
Transnasiona

menghasilkan makna di tengah berbagai transformasi budaya. Makalah ini menunjukkan bahwa produksi 'makna' memerlukan pengalaman terhadap berbagai jenis perbatasan. Makna yang dihasilkan ini, sebagai hasil dari interaksi budaya yang luas antara subjek di dalam perbatasan, menjadi signifikan karena perbatasan menyediakan ruang bagi interaksi tersebut. Interaksi ini mencerminkan apa yang disebut Stuart Hall sebagai 'identifikasi budaya'. Artikel ini juga mengadopsi konsep 'medium' dari Svend Erik Larsen untuk merujuk pada ruang ini serta mengungkap kompleksitas yang melingkupi perbatasan sebagai praktik. Dengan berfokus pada perbatasan simbolik, makalah ini menelusuri novel *The Translator* karya Aboulela untuk memetakan bagaimana perbatasan tersebut diwujudkan dan digunakan dalam menciptakan makna baru melalui berbagai pengalaman pengasingan, perpindahan, dan ambivalensi. Karena novel ini merefleksikan era pascakolonial, makalah ini juga mengangkat konsep 'transnation' dari Bill Ashcroft untuk menegaskan keterbukaan, kompleksitas, potensi, dan multiplikasi, yang tidak hanya membentuk 'transnation', tetapi juga pemahaman Larsen tentang 'medium' serta teori perbatasan dari Schimanski dan Wolfe. Kesimpulan makalah ini menekankan bahwa medium antara perbatasan fisik dan simbolik merupakan ruang di mana subjektivitas mengalami berbagai bentuk konstruksi untuk menghasilkan makna baru.

This is an open access article under the [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.



## A. Introduction

Leila Aboulela's novel *The Translator* (1999) dramatizes a multitude of cultural transformations, culminating in reconceptualizing the usual and familiar cultural conventions and societal discourses in Sudan and Scotland. While portraying these changes occurred in the postcolonial Sudan, Aboulela's work demonstrates how cultural identity has become anachronistic. Scholars like Wail S. Hassan, Sadia Abbas, and Anna Ball underscore, from different angles, that Aboulela's novel is a way to pinpoint the situation of the Muslim community within the new cultural conditions.

Each of the aforementioned critics has contributed to identifying Aboulela's concerns and objectives. Focusing on *The Translator*, Wail S. Hassan (2008) in his article 'Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction' examines the novel's focus on the individual internal conflict between clinching to the Islamic principles of chastity and the temptations of the modern world. Sadia Abbas (2011) in her article 'Leila Aboulela, Religion, and the Challenge of the Novel' underscores

Aboulela's religion turn in literature while depicting the Muslim immigrant experience in the West. Aboulela's affiliation to the religious instructions, advances Abbas, is one of the most instrumental tools against imperialism. "Here is where I am' Rerooting Diasporic Experience in Leila Aboulela's Recent Novels' by Anna Ball (2010) is another article that investigates the two novels *The Translator*, unravelling the unprecedented horizons appeared in the novel's diasporic experiences. Nevertheless, these critics seem to neglect the hidden intrinsic motifs behind the cultural transformations in *The Translator*.

The paper furthers the analysis of Aboulela's novel, *The Translator*. It maps how physical and symbolic borders are manifested and deployed to create new meanings within the subjects' experiences of exile, displacement, and ambivalence. It affirms the dynamic nature of the 'medium' in establishing new horizons for subjectivity, and, accordingly, constructs new conceptions of their lived-experiences. This asserted moving process of subjectivity is referred to as 'cultural identification' on the scale of cultural transformations, and 'Transnation' on the scale of the postcolonial subject. Within this framework appears the intrinsic motif behind the cultural transformations, which *The Translator* dramatizes.

## **B. Research Methods**

The article follows a qualitative approach with a systematic examination of a close reading method. Maintaining this paradigm of research, the article summons Svend Erik Larsen's reflections on the nature of borders and the vital role of the 'medium' in producing new meaning, and relies on Stewart Hall's concept of 'cultural identification' to assert the failure of cultural identity in addressing subjectivity in the postmodern context. Manifesting that Aboulela's novel is produced within the postcolonial conditions, the article brings to view Bill Ashcroft's concept of "The Transnation" for a profound understanding of the complexities of borders and their triggering of various cultural and societal alterations, thereby, producing new meanings.

The theory of border aesthetics can be seen as one configuration of 'cultural identification'. In fact, without the continuous and changeable process

of becoming, through which subjectivity repositions itself constantly, borders will never be crossed, meaning through boundaries will never be created, and most important, borders would not even exist. It is sufficient to assert that the celebrated fixity and specificity of cultural identity hinder any attempt to explore new horizons of meaning, and to create spaces of interactions and negotiations with other different categories and entities. Schimanski and Wolfe, in their edited book, decipher such entanglements in their profound analysis of border aesthetics. They meticulously investigate the intertwined levels of borders from the perspective of aesthetics. Borders are aestheticized for two main reasons; one is that borders cannot be limited to the traditional understanding, which considers borders to be mere lines between separate entities. They entities are usually topographic. Another reason is attributed to their diverse fields they occupy, knowing that Schimanski and Wolfe differentiate between several types of aesthetic borders. Regardless of their manifold different definitions and conceptualization, these borders serve the cultural encounters, negotiations, and even clashes between subjects.

The traditional and simplistic understanding of a 'border' evokes the separating points, lines, or spaces between a series of defined and demarcated entities. This definition neglects the in-between space through which various encounters, negotiations, and clashes between different backgrounds, attitudes and beliefs recur. A border cannot be reduced to a mere typological or geographical definition for its inadequacy in lensing other forms of borders. In fact, the reductionist paradigm in underscoring the solely physical borders requires this revision of investigating other forms of borders, namely symbolic borders. Both physical and symbolic borders are constructed by several discourses of nationalism, cultural identity, affiliation, history, and manifold other social and cultural formations. Experiencing these borders is the inlet to the conditions of changeability and continuity, which result in newness: 'meaning'. In other words, bordercrossers

are exposed to ongoing intersections and transformations. Therefore, borders are in parallel constructed and constructing.

The idea of 'meaning' is crucial to understand how subjects experience borders. Svend Erik Larsen (2007) in his insightful article "Boundaries: Ontology, Methods, Analysis" asserts that boundaries do not refer to a mere end of an entity and the beginning of another because the in-between space has a vital role in bridging the gap between an end and a beginning. Therefore, the end becomes a gateway towards the beginning. This is what Larsen calls the 'interdependence', a space where changeability is a potentiality. This space, argues Larsen, can be seen on two levels: "manifestation' and 'interaction'. These levels, respectively, affirm gateways and interactions. Larsen states that "boundaries in any context, organic or non-organic, human or non-human, involve at least two interdependent levels—a level of manifestation and a level of conditions, each of them with two aspects that produce their interdependence" (p.99-100). Accordingly, the medium comes within the 'interdependence' as a space that produces meaning. Meaning is seen through the interaction between subjects in an open space. It is this production of meaning within borders that *The Translator* dramatizes.

### **C. Result and Discussion**

*The Translator* narrates the story of Sammar, a Sudanese widowed woman who lives in Scotland, working as an Arabic-English translator in the office of Rae at Aberdeen University. Her regular meetings with Rae unravel the latter's attractive demeanor and incomparable benevolence. Sammar falls in love with Rae and asks him to convert to Islam so she can marry him. As a man of full commitment to science and experimentation, Mr. Rae refuses Sammar's idea because it contradicts his principles. However, the border of faith is crossed by Rae by the end of the novel, demonstrating the effects of cultural identification in creating spaces of negotiations for subjects. The first aspect of border crossing lies in the title of the novel *the Translator* because it evokes a series of defining elements of this profession, translation. The translator brings to view the ability of going beyond the demarcations of one's language and culture, and demonstrates the fact that the process of translation is a genuine penetration into the space of cultural encounters and negotiations. Concretely,

the novel frequently shows how Sammar practices borders while translating different types of texts from Arabic to English. It is this system of bordering that permits Sammar to encounter and negotiate new horizons within the canal of translation, thereby, set a gateway towards new 'meaning' production.

Sammar's strategic interplay between two languages and two cultures as a translator demonstrates that translation is a genuine movement within and between languages and cultures. Jacques Derrida's idea of 'translations as transaction' explicates Sammar's aim as a translator (Derrida, 381). 'Translation as a transaction' stands for the extent to which the translator can move from one language, one culture to another language and another culture. It can be seen that for Derrida, Sammar as a translator, seeks to transfer a whole culture and its identity to another. This transference occurs in a relative way because, following Derrida, the translator aspires to the most 'relevant translation'. A relevant translation is a translation that seeks to the most possible one. Strikingly, 'translation as transaction' generates a space where the original text is no longer present, a space where the targeted text will never be fully attainable. This space of interchangeability and negotiation supersedes the cultural identity within which a text is produced to an open space, that of cultural identification. Surely, Sammar's profession as a translator reinforces a space of cultural identification, a space where borders can be crossed to generate 'meaning'.

A series of changes and transformations of additions, omissions, or adjustments, may occur within this canal to reproduce meanings. The novel goes further portraying the ways in which the translator, as a subject in exile, does not only reproduce meaning within the particular and limited space of Aberdeen University. Rather, the translator is actually constructed within much bigger and wider canals of the ongoing processes of continuity and changeability. It is a reflection of the postmodern subject, which undertakes perpetual transformations within transnationality and transculturality. These transformations alter a whole series of cultural specificities that constitute cultural identity. From another angle, these recurring transformations mark the multifaceted presence of border crossings within the core of the translator. Indeed, the notion of practicing borders is a

fundamental element in the postcolonial experiences because of the advent condition of displacement that Sammar experiences.

*The translator* reflects processes in which the institutionally constructed borders can be broken apart among cultures, and through this process, the translator undergoes the governing regularities of numerous discursive practices, which reshape the identity of translator. The novel shows how different institutions of religion, family, and tradition are culturally revised by the translator to culminate in new underpinning postmodern redefinitions of subjectivity, identity, and culture. Genuinely, by evoking the pivotal role of the transnation, the idea of border crossing becomes clearer because, on the one hand, border-crossing aims, as Ashcroft advances, to go beyond the boundaries of the nation without necessarily crossing the borders of the state. On the other hand, the whole conceptualization of the transnation is constituted upon the practicing of borders. This intertwinement between different concepts is meant to renew the cultural momentum within conditions where subjectivity, identity, and culture are drastically altered. Indeed, the translator is a postmodern and/or postcolonial subject that practices different types of borders, symbolic and physical, and demonstrates the inevitable condition of the transnation in the recent postcolonial context. This inevitability of changing from a fixed and stagnant paradigm to a flexible and continuous one lies in the fact that cultural identity is no longer sufficient to define the postmodern and/or the postcolonial subject. Therefore, the presence of cultural identification is essential not only because it uncovers a series of cultural intricacies and ambiguities that problematize the modernist definition of subjectivity, but also because it contains numerous founding elements of border crossing theories. To practice cultural identification is to practice borders.

The novel opens up with the omniscient narrator describing Sammar's dreaming of a terrible weather and a planned meeting with Mr. Rae Isles. The dream unravels the first configuration of geographical borders through Sammar's feelings of anxiety and fear because she is "afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this country, afraid of the wind even" (p. 3). Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe suggest in their theory of physical borders the issue of border

aestheticization within the contexts of nature and thereby affirm the reshape of "the subjectivity of those subjects who encounter borders in their everyday life" (p.1). These geographically and topographically defined physical borders reflected in Sammar's dream are genuinely constructed within the subject's profound identification with space. It is the subject perception of nature that imposes differentiations and borders between different types of natures. Mireille Rosello and Timothy Saunders emphasize that "there is no such thing as a natural border without an aesthetic regime that organizes our representation of the relationship between nature and borders. Nature and borders are always imagined and therefore represented, aestheticized" (p.25). What this statement expresses is that Sammar's geographical displacement brings to view the extent to which borders of nature can be natural. The fact is that borders of nature are constructed within discourses of bordering nature through numerous representations and aestheticization.

The various intersections between the subject and nature contribute to the alteration of subjectivity. Once borders of nature are experienced, subjectivity creates new meanings that change the most founding elements of cultural identity. The effect of becoming in reconstructing subjectivity cannot be examined aloof from the pivotal role of border crossings. In fact, it is the experience of borders that permit the changeable and the continuous attitude of subjectivity. This precise point evokes a variety of common denominators between Hall's theory of identification and the theory of borders. One compelling reason is that identification is meant to transcend series of demarcations within which cultural identity is established. Clearly, practicing borders requires eliminating the defining constructions of cultural identity such as fixity, locality, specificity, and totality. Akin to identification, border crossing is a process that postmodern and/or postcolonial subjectivity experiences. Another reason lies in the role that displacement has in altering the whole conceptualization of subjectivity. In other words, displacement is an actual process of border crossing that subjectivity experiences, and thereby generates a multitude of reconstructing potentialities for subjectivity. Border crossings take subjectivity from the limitedness of cultural identity to the openness of cultural identification. This intriguing deduction brings to fore Ashcroft's concept of the



transnation, which describes the navigation of the postcolonial subject through the unlimited smooth space, and which deconstructs the dichotomous paradigms of cultural identity and state. In short, it can be demonstrated that the experience of borders precedes identification and the transnation in the ways that they inaugurate new spaces and positions for subjectivity.

The novel dramatizes these abovementioned intricacies altogether through Sammar, the translator. Sammar was born in Scotland from Sudanese parents, and at the age of seven, she moved to Sudan. This event marks the first aspect of crossing topographical borders in Sammar's life labeling her with several configurations of the postcolonial subject. Her experience of displacement from one geographical position to another in an early age leads to the fatal death of her husband, Tariq. Sammar was born with a name that "means conversations with friends, late at night. It's what the desert nomads liked to do, talk leisurely by the light of the moon, when it was no longer so hot and the day's work was over" (p.5). The meaning of "Sammar" is brought after Rae's, the Middle-East historian and lecturer, questions about the origin of her name. Rae has accumulated considerable knowledge about the Sahara, and he knows "that most Arabic names had familiar meanings" (p.5). Rae's knowledge alludes to his experience of cultural borders while referring to the meaning of Sammar's name.

Rae's practicing physical and symbolic borders is a fulcrum to his diverse discussions with Sammar. He was "a Middle-East historian and a lecturer in Third World Politics" before committing himself solely to research (p.5). Being "an Islamic expert" indicates the epistemological borders he constantly practices throughout his academic research at the university (p.5). It is through the bordercrossing event that Ray crosses the border of the unknown to the known. The "epistemological plane splits the known and the unknown" (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2017, p. 23). Mr. Ray, thanks to his expertise in the fields of history, oriental and Islamic studies, exemplifies one way in which the medium is not actually a line between two entities, nor is it an ending point and the beginning of another. What Rae reveals is the capacity of exploring the space between his culture and that of the *Other*. His demeanor in approaching Islam and endeavor to explore

more about the Orient, namely the Islamic world, appears in his disagreement with the statement of "an Islamic expert". The refusal through stating that "there could be no such monolith" evokes the continuous process of discovering new possible facts about Islam (p.5). This constant research leads Ray to internalize Islam as an individual experience of spirituality.

The idea of the 'medium' is unavoidable because cultural identification has recently been viewed as witnessing a shift from paradigms tending to be rather exclusionary to models of a more inclusive character. Approaching cultural identification, that is, has made a marked leap from highlighting forms of authenticity and totality - involving dichotomization, fixity, and unity - toward underscoring more flexible models marked by complexity, fragmentation, potentiality, and multiplicity. One related reason is that cultural identification exhibits the interdependence and the interconnectedness of entities. Another reason is the endless open potentialities and multiplicities through the ongoing process of becoming with its two fundamental components of continuity and changeability. The fact is that Larsen's notion of the medium is a clear manifestation of cultural identification. Both concepts reflect the experiences of subjectivity through different boundaries where numerous configurations of interactions and negotiations recur. Sammar and Mr. Ray are two examples of this subjectivity. Both characters assert a range of intricate relationships with their environment, their friends and acquaintances, and their society. It is these intricacies that contribute "sensible forms created by humans in the various media we are able to use in order to produce meaning about our world of experience" (Larsen, 4). Affirming this brings to view the extent to which boundaries can generate new meanings. This idea, following Larsen, expresses how boundaries are genuine articulation of aesthetics. For Larsen, in the context of boundaries, aesthetic refers to "the study of human interaction with already existing boundaries with the possibility of changing them" (p.4). Indeed, Larsen's astute remark can clearly be seen through Sammar and various other characters.

In the novel, Sammar's conversation with Rae about Tariq, her dead husband and her aunt's Mahasen's son, evokes the symbolic epistemological level of borders that Mr. Ray crosses. It appears that Mr. Rae is aware of the differences

between Arabic alphabetic letters together with their pronunciation and, obviously, English letters and morphemes. His stressing on the "Q" while pronouncing the name Tariq reveals his cultural encounters with the Arab society and culture. Approving his knowledge, Sammar mentions that Tariq is "written with a *qaf* but we pronounce the *qaf* as a g back home" (p.6). This addendum brings to view other aspects of experiencing borders by Rae. His nodding of his head showing his agreement with Sammar is a genuine manifested well-versed of his persona. The narrator states that "he knew the letters of the Arabic alphabet; he had lived in her part of the world" (p.6). Rae's living in Sammar's part of the world manifests the amount of interactions that have reshuffled his attitudes. His disagreements with the mainstream in his country are actually attributed to the spaces of encountering the Other that he experiences through travelling and through academic research. In addition, Rae resembles peoples of other nations and culture. The fact is that he can easily "pass for a Turk or a Persian. He was dark enough" (p.6). For instance, Rae journey to Morocco evinces how he could "walk as if disguise, none suspected he was Scottish as long as he did not speak and let his pronunciation give him away" (p.6). This resemblance is attributed to the ecological borders that differentiate between different people from different parts of the world.

Sammar's frequent meetings with Mr. Rae reveal the story of her dead husband, Tariq, and its aftermath. The Sudanese couple moved to Scotland after their marriage. Tariq was a medical student before a car accident caused his death, and enters Sammar into series of bewilderment and confusion. Sammar unravels the importance of the cosmopolitan space where women "whom she kept calling by the wrong names", regularly visit her at that time to express their sincere condolences and to help her with cooking food and washing clothes and dishes (p.8). As Sammar states, these stranger women "prayed, recited the Qur'an, spent the night on the couch and on the floor" to manifest the abovementioned harmonious cosmopolitan space (p.8). These women are not Arab because Sammar keeps mispronouncing their names, an indication of the different cultural backgrounds that faith unites. Practicing the Islamic rituals in Scotland alludes to

the possibility of merging locality to globality and thereby to constitute open and unfixed configurations of glocal subjectivity. In addition, the narrator shows that these women "were not doing this for her or for Tarig, but only because they believed it was the right thing to do" (p.9). The creation of a cosmopolitan space that is encapsulated within spirituality empowers Sammar's attitude after the death of her husband despite her reconsidered relationship with her homeland.

Sammar's feelings of exile appear in her attire, covering "her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colors" (p.9). The Narrator states that Sammar intends "to look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerizing as the Afghan princess she had once seen on TV wearing hijab, the daughter of an exiled leader of the mujahedeen" (p.8). The sense of loss through the experience of exile that Sammar reflects is not a demonstration of limited potentialities and an absence of multiplicity. The fact is that the car accident marks a significant turning point in her life to blaze new trails. It is for this reason that she goes back to Africa with her son, and it is also for this reason that she chooses to leave her son with Mahasen and go back to Scotland. In this country, Sammar continues her journey of reconstructing her personality. Her interactions with other people like Mr. Ray and his secretary reveals numerous aspects of cultural identification. For Mr. Rae, signs of admiration and love are manifested in larger scales. It is not an admiration of his conduct and devotion to his research, and it is not his objective writings on Islam that stimulates Sammar's feelings. The fact is that the latter reflects several **hidden** aspects that demonstrate her love for Mr. Ray, a state of mind that will be confronted by her faith. This personal identification is actually attributed to cultural identification because both Sammar and Mr. Rae circle within the orbit of potentiality and openness. The limited and limiting paradigm of cultural identity is trespassed while crossing the boundaries of each other. In other words, both Sammar and Rae are a genuine demonstration of continuity and changeability within the open and undetermined space of borders.

Another character in the novel is Yasmin, the secretary of Mr. Rae. Her origins reflect the effects of displacement are reconstructing her personality. Yasmin's parents are descended "from Pakistan but she was born and had lived all

her life in different parts of Britain" (p.11). Yasmin resembles Sammar in the way that both descend from ex-colonized countries by Britain. Because of displacement, immigration, and exile, aspects of ambivalence must characterize both characters' experiences in Scotland. However, the similarities between Sammar and Yasmin do not prove any sort of homogenous attitude. Each of these characters has different modes of thinking and different aspirations. As a matter of fact, Sammar and Yasmin create a space of multiplicity and potentiality through which cultural encounters take place. The medium is manifested through interactions between the two characters, and it is obvious that these interactions produce other meaning under the ceaselessly ongoing flow of cultural identification. One character differentiating Yasmin from Sammar is that she has "a habit of making general statements starting with 'we', where 'we' meant the whole of the Third World and its people" (p.11). This homogenizing statement is actually a flaw because of the tremendous differences that can be counted between Sudan and Pakistan for instance. Yet, this divisive statement alludes to the colonial boundaries that were created by the colonizer to keep a binary opposition between the west and the rest of the world.

Indeed, Yasmin's statement, entailing ideological, historical, geographical, and cultural dimensions, is a genuine reference to the deeply grained colonial premise of supremacy. The boundaries that colonialism creates, following Ashcroft (2019), are manifestations of those borders which are constructed to be "a practice that produces power relationships and establishes inequalities between those who are in and those who are not" (p.3). Borders throughout different periods of time have changed, and it is no wonder that Schimanski and Wolfe (2017) bring to view the idea of the imaginary to explicate the processes in which "both confirm and interrogate their own structuring" (p.25). The imaginary level of borders is inserted within the theory of borders aesthetics. It is meant to grasp the historical and ideological drives of borders between interdependent entities. The use of "interdependent" evokes Larsen's notion that "boundaries in any context, organic or non- organic, human or non-human, involve at least two interdependent levels – a level of manifestation and a level of conditions, each

of them with two aspects that produce their interdependence" (p.3). It is through these manifestations and conditions of borders that new meanings come out to demonstrate the continuous process of cultural identification. Sammar and Yasmin are two typical examples through whom the border levels of manifestation and condition generates new meanings. It is crucial to expound Larsen's ideas of 'manifestation' and 'condition' because of their significance in apprehending more profoundly the idea of the medium. For meaning to be generated within the medium, various interactions must take place between subjects of each interdependent side. The manifestation level is defined, on the one hand, as an end-like point, a barrier that suggests the end of one interdependent entity and marks the gateway towards new open and multiple horizons to create the beginning of another interdependent entity, on the other. The condition level stands for subjects' maintenance of their static and fixed existential paradigm, and their ability to interact with other subjects of the other interdependent entity. It is noticeable that each of these levels has alleged inner-contradictory definitions, which Larsen defines as oppositions. In fact, the merge of the two levels is what generates ambivalence, potentiality, multiplicity, continuity, and changeability. From this process appears the interdependence that "requires a specific medium for the boundaries to emerge and for the conditions to produce changes" (p.4). Accordingly, Yasmin, Sammar, and Rae are genuine example of subjects within this medium through which their identities are constantly re/constructed. From the wide-ranging scale of cultural studies, this is a clear manifestation of cultural identification.

The negotiated space between the west and the east can actually be considered as one culmination of colonialism. The divisive Eurocentric tendency of imperial powers appears not only in the devastating consequences of colonization. The fact is that colonization draws a series of lines between those who colonize and those who are colonized. It is no wonder that binary oppositions such as civilized / savage or modern/ primitive are deeply rooted in the colonial legacy. The map that Sammar notices in an article about traditional world maps reflects this tendency towards belittling otherness. She notices how "Europe appeared larger than South America,

North America larger than Africa, Greenland larger than China, when the opposite was true" (p.16). Indeed, borders are a recurring process within different modalities of power. From another angle, such borders demonstrate the existence of the imaginary level of borders through which groups and individuals create their own space aloof from other groups or individuals. The imaginary level demonstrates that "borders are consequently at the same time confirmations and interrogations of the very construct that they are: constructs which simultaneously include and exclude, echoing spatially the double movement of 'deviation from and toward'" (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2017, p.60). Affirming the colonial exclusionary reason through the traditional maps and reconsidering them through the contemporary maps underscores two vital roles that borders have. Borders can confirm constructed truths and interrogate them overtime. It is the intrinsic nature of borders that they are simultaneous ongoing (re)constructions of and by subjectivity.

The importance of evoking the imaginary level of a border by Schimanski and Wolfe (2017) is attributed to the strikingly multidimensional and multifaceted roles it plays in constructing subjectivity. It refers to the processes in which "communities think of themselves collectively, or to communal, epistemological spheres presumably anchored in imaginations' invocations" (p.62). To reconsider the traditional map through revising its flaws and inaccuracies produces an "equal-area map, Africa was a massive elongated yellow, Britain a rosy insignificance" (p. 16). Borders are a creation of the dominant discourses of the imperial powers. Yellow can connote desert, heat, primitiveness and savagery. The term "rosy" can be seen as a genuine reference to brightness and modernity. It is true that borders without ideological and historical dimensions are mere fences in the way that they are mainly meant to create groups of inside and outside. The emerging in-between space within the temporary era designates the necessity of questioning these dimensions. Questioning the negotiated spaces through subjects' interactions and intersections, from the inclusive perspective of cultural studies, summons how cultural identification functions in altering subjects' paradigms. Actually, cultural identification is a huge contribution to terminating the traditional thinking about

borders. In fact, cultural identification is a continuous process of crossing different types and different levels of borders, both poetically and aesthetically.

A border can be defined as a border only with a "sensible component" (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2017, p.12). This sensibility refers to the necessity that a subject has to "perceive, feel, sense" the border (12, 2017). From the perspective of the symbolic plane of border aesthetics, the borders function as a distinguishing element "between values (right and wrong, good and bad)" (p.23). It is within this context that Sammar and Yasmin hold the conversation on the possibility of Mr. Rae conversion. The two viewpoints differ because of their different arguments. On the one hand, practicing this symbolic border requires a series of concessions and sacrifices that Yasmin's awareness of the Western discourse entail. Sammar, on the other hand, in accordance with her endeavor to marry Mr. Rae, presupposes that converting to Islam can be a secret. Sammar's endeavor to marriage is actually demonstrated not only through her conversation with Yasmin. The fact is that the idea of marriage constantly preoccupies her. For her, marriage, affirming to her aunt Mahasen, is meant to have "a focus on [her] life" (p.28). The idea of marriage is a genuine practice of a range of boundaries especially that Sammar aims to marry Mr. Rae. It is an aspiration to find various commonalities between two subjects. Both Sammar and Mr. Rae live under the unfixed, unlimited, ambivalent space of in-betweenness. The cultural integration and the psychological state of Sammar are definitely pinpointed through these intertwined conceptualizations of culture and psychology, cultural identification and personal identification.

As a Muslim living in Scotland, Sammar practices the Islamic rituals regularly. She is a devout person who wakes up at dawn when she hears the muezzin adding "the words prayer is better than sleep" to the Azan (p.32). The novel shows that she fasts to make up "for days missed in Ramadan" (32). These practices designate the ambivalence of Sammar's character within a cosmopolitan space. Faith for Sammar does not prevent her from integrating with people of different religious beliefs. In fact, Sammar exceeds the limiting boundaries of the traditional reasoning of religiosity, particularly in Islam. This claim is demonstrated in her conversations with Mr. Rae who celebrates Christmas with



his ex-wife family in Edinburgh. It is true that "they lived in worlds divided by simple facts -religion, country of origin, race - data that fills forms" (p.34). For Sammar, the simple constructed borders are meant to be crossed overtime because they misrepresent her state as a transcultural and transnational subject. Another fact is that Mr. Rae is different from other all Scottish people Sammar has encountered, a state of ambivalence that opens a multitude of potentialities for crossing the simultaneously constructed and constructing physical and symbolic borders.

In addition to what is mentioned, Rae interests in the emancipatory movements of Africa put him against the western discourse, which celebrates colonialism and seeks to maintain cultural and economic domination. This is clear through "the names of books lined up on the wall of his office, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, The Wretched of the Earth, Religion in the Third World, Culture and Imperialism, Radical Islam, Terrorism in Africa, Muslim Extremism in Egypt*" (p.35). For him "a so-called developing country is characterized by three things: one, an export-based economy; two, an inadequate infrastructure; three, a history of colonial rule" (p.35). All these attributions culminate in considering Rae an in-between subject with a unique replica of the ex- colonized countries, meaning that his ability to transcend the dominant discourse of colonialism permits the emergence of new horizons of meaning. Such opposition to the Western colonial powers constantly jeopardizes his position as a scholar and a professor at the university. The state of uncertainty and difference mark the character of Rae not only because of his commitment to his professional job but also because of his self- convictions that the continuation of colonialism and the distortion of Islam are two imposed discourses on different parts of the world. Actually, Rae's awareness of the colonial situation is genuinely attributed to his knowledge about otherness, his practicing of multifarious types and levels of borders. These borders accentuate the role of cultural identification that reshuffles subjectivity throughout space and time, thereby, pave the ground to another meaning.

Rae's celebration of Christmas with his family in Edinburgh brings to view the extent to which affection and love contribute to crossing certain symbolic

borders. His phone call to Sammar while she prepares herself for "the *tasbeeh*" can be seen as a foreshadowing of the novel's ultimate end, love and marriage. At this particular time, Sammar sets for *tasbeeh*, which means to rely on "her thumb counting on each segment of her fingers, three for each finger, fifteen for a hand, *Astaghfir Allah, Astaghfir Allah, Astaghfir Allah, . . . I seek forgiveness from Allah . . . I seek forgiveness from Allah . . . I seek forgiveness . . . the twenty-ninth time, thirty*" (p.37). Before she finishes her *tasbeeh*, she receives a call from Mr. Rae towards who she feels "warm" because of his meekness and kindness towards her. The borders of religion are crossed at this precise point. Rae prioritizes calling Sammar while leaving his celebration of Christmas with his family, an incident that takes Sammar by storm not only because of the call in holiday but also his celebration at his ex-wife's parents' house. For Sammar, this is a "culture- shock" because "an old man in Edinburgh was allowing his daughter's ex-husband under his roof. This must be civilized behavior, an 'amicable divorce'" (p.38). In comparison to Sudan, an ex-husband is the "one who 'turned out to be a son of a dog' or 'she turned out to be mad' and were treated as such. No one 'stayed friends', no one stayed on talking terms" (p.38). This comparison unravels Sammar's acceptance of cultural difference which creates space of numerous negotiations and encounters.

To expound on the undefined thing in Rae's character is to map his experience with Amelia years before he meets Sammar. His narrative exhibits the unavoidable rhizomatic identity that is characterized by ambivalence, continuity, multiplicity, and potentiality. These components of his rhizomatic identity lead Rae to terminate his relationship with Amelia and moves back to his country. However, Rae has visited Morocco after his divorce from Amelia because of his admiration of and interest in the Moroccan culture. Sammar, who passionately listens to the narration of his experience, asks him about the reasons that make him "like a place, visit it again, study its culture and history when something horrible happened to you there?" (p.64). The question alludes to the disappointments that entail Rae's marriage to Amelia. However, his reply evokes aspects of a rhizomatic attitude that shapes his character. Going back to Morocco is necessary for Rae "because it was healthy for [me], like medicine. It made [me] less hard. And [I] learnt things [I]

could not have learnt from hooks. Like [you]" (64). Rae's reply summons the epistemological level of borders that "splits the known and the unknown" (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2017, P. 14). Rae investigates this level of borders through an empirical study that makes him learn new things that cannot be known through mere academic scholarship. In addition, his empirical studies make him resilient and flexible, two qualities that oppose the cultural identity slogans of fixity and authenticity.

The straightforwardly fathomed implications of the phrase "like you" confuse Sammar. Rae acknowledges how Sammar makes him "feel safe" in stating: "I feel safe with you" (p.64). Signs of love are revealed through Rae's linking a subject to Sammar being with him. The effect of love is that it occurs within the realm of personal identification. As mentioned earlier, the two forms of identification, personal and cultural, usher in the celebrated idea of marriage by the end of the novel. Still, crossing a series of borders is unavoidable due to the presence of the interdependent. A border is made to be crossed, to be negotiated, or even to be eliminated within the subject's experiences with others. Ambivalence has a vital role in re/constructing identity of bordercrossers. It creates horizons of potentials that enable subject to navigate smoothly through different spaces. It is this smoothness of space that Sammar and Rae experience while being symbolically displaced, both in Scotland but different from Scottish people. The rhizomatic attitude of Sammar and Rae in this context is proven to be a series of continuous personal and cultural intersections, and love is to be seen as a drive of this relationship. Accordingly, cultural identification is a constant recurrence of transcultural and/or transnational negotiations and encounters.

Similar to Sammar, Fareed seeks to convince to Islam. Rae, however, does not claim that Fareed's insistence on his conversion to be a source of annoyance. In fact, he considers Fareed to confuse two different levels of a person: the professional and the personal. For Rae, being a scholar of Islamic history and religion does not mean the acceptance of the Qur'an to be a sacred book by God. Therefore, his profession cannot be the reason towards converting to Islam. At this precise point Rae shows how the subject can experience the epistemological level of

borders while retaining ontological and spiritual beliefs and inclinations. Cultural identification enables subjects to change on a constant basis. The changes that usually occur not always meant to be drastic. This is what Rae demonstrates through the story of Fareed. This uplifting new meaning of recognizing otherness comes within what Larsen calls the condition of borders. As it is illustrated earlier, subjects live at the interdependent, which allows them to encounter with others, to negotiate meanings, and thereby to create new potentialities and generate multiplicities. This multifaceted aspect of potentiality and multiplicity designate the inevitable presence of becoming within the frames of faith. The idea of faith, for Sammar, has other hidden aspirations that Yasmin foresees throughout the previous events. Sammar inwardly evinces that "unless [you] become a Muslim we will not be able to get married, we will not be together and I will be miserable and alone" (p.89). Indeed, love as a sign of personal identification plays a vital role in bridging the cultural gaps between Rae and Sammar.

The significance of Sammar's visit to Rae at the hospital manifests a series of personal and cultural aspects of identification. Her conversation with Yasmin after the visit reveals the profound entangled aspects of identification, aspects that assert the multifarious experiences of border crossing, and that the previous events constantly unravel. Sammar's visit is actually attributed to the drive of love, which stimulates her manners of dialogues with Rae. This appears in the monologue she prefers to keep secret. Hitherto, knowing that Rae is not a Muslim prevents her from announcing her love and her willingness to marry him. This symbolic border of faith has a vital role in shaping the personality of Sammar. This prevention can be seen as a subject limitation in navigating through the smooth space as the rhizomatic identity affirms through the condition of becoming. Yet, evoking the agency of Sammar, this prevention does not contradict the postmodern and postcolonial labels of potentiality and multiplicity, which are ascertained throughout the novel. Her agency is what prevents her from exceeding the boundary of faith towards another paradigm. In other words, faith is a designation of potentiality and multiplicity that characterizes the postmodern subject. It is a personal conviction rather than an

imposed cultural discourse on her, a manifestation of the manifold crossed borders of tradition and locality.

Rae and Sammar meeting in the latter's homeland summons how subjects can shift their paradigm as a genuine manifestation of becoming and cultural identification. Rae describes crossing the manifold boundaries from Scotland to Sudan as the smoothest trip he has ever experienced. Akin to this spontaneously uttered statement, Rae's experience of the symbolic boundaries is definitely smooth. Indeed, the smooth space has a pivotal role in governing this postmodern subject while practicing the borders of nature and culture. From the gray sly of Scotland, as Sammar describes, to the hot and dusty weather of Sudan, Rae internalizes the duality of "freedom from" and "freedom to". The former is attributed to his ability to go beyond the dominating discourses of his society along with the political agendas that frame and conceptualize the West in comparison to the East. The latter is revealed through his conversion to Islam after realizing the strengths and opportunities this spiritual experience entail, the realization of the fact that "knowledge is necessary, that's true. But faith, it comes direct from Allah" (p.198). Internalizing the tenets of Islam evokes the rhizomatic identity upon which the idea of the transnation is established. Not only does Rae cross the cultural symbolic boundaries but he genuinely forms new spaces and new possibilities through which meaning is produced.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The paper concludes that borders, physical and symbolic, are spaces within which huge cultural interactions occur. This space, referred to as 'the medium', marks significant transformations of subjectivity. The paper, throughout the systematic analysis, of *The Translator*, explored how cultural identity is itself anachronistic in investigating the postmodern and postcolonial subject. Overcoming this insufficiency, the paper demonstrates that 'cultural identification', from the spectrum of culture, and 'the transnation', from the spectrum of the postcolonial experience, meet the characteristics this subjectivity.

The novel is a series of oscillations between tradition and modernity, and religiosity and secularism to create ongoing positions for its characters within the vast conceptualization of borders. The continuous navigation through these

borders permits the emergence of new, diverse, and complex pathways within which the postcolonial and the postmodern subject ultimately generates new meanings.

Overall, the novel shows that borders are made to be crossed, physically or symbolically, consciously or unconsciously, and that 'a medium' cannot be limited to a mere line between different entities. It is the new understanding of the 'medium' that results in revealing a whole range of subject experiences where newness emerges. *The Translator* dramatizes the mentioned concepts because it reflects a profoundly complex human conditions of postmodernity and postcoloniality.

### **Bibliography**

- Abbas, S. (2011). Leila Aboulela, Religion, and the Challenge of the novel. *Contemporary Literature*, 52(3), 430-461. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cli.2011.0034>
- Aboulela, L. (2006). *The translator* (1. American ed). Black Cat.
- Ashcroft, B. (2016). *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315642918>
- . (2019). Borders, Bordering, and the Transnation. *English Academy Review*, 36(1), 5-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2019.158426>
- .(2010). Transnation. In J. Wilson, C. Sandru, & S. Lawson Welsh (Eds.), *Rerouting the postcolonial: New directions for the new millennium* (pp. 72-85). Routledge.
- Ball, A. (2010). 'Here is Where I am': Rerouting Diaspora Experience in Leila Aboulela's Recent Novels. In J. Wilson, et al. (Eds.), *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium* (pp. 118-127). Routledge.
- Castillo, A. D. (2007). Borders, Identities, Objects. In J. Schimanski & S. Wolfe (Eds.), *Border poetics de-limited* (1st ed., pp. 115-148). Wehrhahn.
- Derrida, J. (2021). What is a relevant translation? In L. Venuti (Ed.), *The translation studies reader* (4th ed., pp. 373-396). Routledge.
- Guattari, F., & Deleuze, G. (2005). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.
- Hall, S., & Du Gay, P. (Eds.). (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. Sage.

- . (1996). Who Needs 'Identity'? In S. Hall & P. Du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1-17). Sage.
- Hassan, W. S. (2008). Leila Aboulela and the ideology of Muslim Immigrant fiction. *NOVEL a Forum on Fiction*, 41(2-3), 298-318. <https://doi.org/10.1215/ddnov.041020298>
- Jannah, F. R. (2024). Penerjemahan Video Dakwah Syekh Nabil Al-Awadi: Analisis Kesalahan Fonetik Artikulatoris-Auditoris: The Translation of Sheikh Nabil Al-Awadi's Da'wah Video: An Analysis of Articulatory-Auditory Phonetic Errors. *An-Nahdah Al-'Arabiyah*, 4(2), 155-193.
- Larsen, E. E. (2007). Boundaries Ontology Methods, Analysis. In J. Schimanski & S. Wolfe (Eds.), *Border poetics de-limited* (1. Aufl) (pp. 79-114). Wehrhahn.
- Saunders, T., & Rosello, M. (2017). Ecology. In J. Schimanski & S. Wolfe (Eds.), *Border aesthetics: Concepts and intersections* (pp. 25-49). Berghahn.
- Schimanski, J., & Wolfe, S. (Eds.). (2007). *Border poetics de-limited* (1. Aufl). Wehrhahn.
- . (2017). *Border aesthetics: Concepts and intersections*. Berghahn.
- Wilson, J., Sandru, C., & Lawson Welsh, S. (Eds.). (2010). *Rerouting the postcolonial: New directions for the new millennium*. Routledge.
- Zulhelmi, A., Ahmad, M. Y., Fajri, A., Shaliha, C. A. A., & Sofyan, Z. (2024). The Impact of Philology Practicum for Arabic Language and Literature Students on The Preservation of Ancient Manuscripts at Dayah Teungku Chiek Awe Geutah: Dampak Praktikum Filologi Mahasiswa Prodi Bahasa dan Sastra Arab Terhadap Pelestarian Naskah Kuno Di Dayah Teungku Chiek Awe Geutah. *Indonesian Journal of Islamic History and Culture*, 5(2), 125-131.