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# The Journey Narrative: The Trope of Women's Mobility and Travel in Contemporary Arab Women's Literary Narratives

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THE JOURNEY NARRATIVE: THE TROPE OF WOMEN'S MOBILITY AND TRAVEL IN  
CONTEMPORARY ARAB WOMEN'S LITERARY NARRATIVES

THE JOURNEY NARRATIVE: THE TROPE OF WOMEN'S MOBILITY AND TRAVEL IN  
CONTEMPORARY ARAB WOMEN'S LITERARY NARRATIVES

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the trope of women's journey and the various kinds of movement and travel it includes employed and represented by three contemporary Arab women literary writers, Ghada Samman, Ahdaf Soueif, and Leila Aboulela in their literary narratives as well as travelogue in the case of Samman. The primary texts analyzed in this study are Samman's *Beirut 75* and *The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase*, Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, and Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*. These texts demonstrate how the journey trope becomes a fresh narrative strategy used by Arab women writers that allows the representation of the instability, unpredictability, and heterogeneity of Arab women's identities. The multiple subjectivities the female persona/protagonists occupy become possible due to their mobility and movement, crossing the borders of time and space and occupying a fluid place of their own theoretical and imaginative construction. In these texts, travel creates a geographic in-between space for these women that allows them to contest essentialized views of their identities and narrate their own individual, hybrid, cross-cultural, and transnational identities that continually undergo transformation and change. I argue that the mobility, travel experiences, journeys, and physical displacement the persona/protagonists go through serve as tropes of female agency: movement allows them to map personal geographies and exist in a liminal space of their own construction, where they counter fixed Western Orientalist, Neo-Orientalist, and traditional patriarchal discourses that presented them at different historical moments as speechless, subaltern, and stripped of their agency. As a result, the journey trope serves both as a way to examining the varied representations of Arab woman subjectivities in addition to destabilizing fixed notions of gendered, cultural, and religious identity formations.

This dissertation is approved for recommendation  
to the Graduate Council.

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my dear parents, Fathieh Zo'ubi and Ahmad Daraiseh, whose unconditional love and support made me believe in myself. Mom and Dad, this is for you!

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## Introduction

This study examines the trope of women's journey and the various kinds of movement and travel it includes employed and represented by three contemporary Arab women literary writers, Ghada Samman, Ahdaf Soueif, and Leila Aboulela in their literary narratives as well as travelogue, in the case of Samman. The heterogeneous and multiple subjectivities the female persona/protagonists occupy become possible due to their mobility and movement, crossing the borders of time and space and occupying a fluid place of their own theoretical and imaginative construction. The trope of journey allows the representation of the women, their subjectivities, and the texts as dynamic literary products circulating across dynamic and unfixed cultural and geographic borderlines. In addition, mobility allows these protagonists to defy any attempt to be defined solely by a certain geographic location, discourse, ideology, or literary tradition. Movement and journey in the selected texts and in the lives of these women protagonists and/or author provides a means to representing these unpredictable, unfixed, and hybrid subjectivities. This dissertation underscores how the trope of journey becomes a fresh narrative strategy used by Arab women writers that allows the representation of the instability and unpredictability of identity. The aim of using journey as a narrative strategy is to destabilize the construction of identity and move away from fixed assumptions and stereotypical representations of Arab women. As a result, the journey trope serves both as a way of examining the varied representations of Arab woman subjectivities and of destabilizing fixed notions of gendered, cultural, and religious identity formations. This dissertation focuses on analyzing the representation of the shifting subjectivities of Arab women and their interaction with the cultural, geographic, and religious dynamics that contribute to the unpredictable and dynamic representation of these subjectivities. The primary texts analyzed in this study are Samman's

*Beirut 75* and *The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase*, Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, and Aboulela's *The Translator and Minaret*.

This dissertation addresses the way these literary representations of the trope of journey demonstrate how travel creates a geographic in-between space for the protagonists that allows them to contest essentialized views of their identities and narrate their own individual, hybrid, cross-cultural, and transnational identities that continually undergo transformation and change. I argue that the mobility, travel experiences, journeys, and physical displacement the author/protagonists go through serve as tropes of female agency: movement allows them to map personal geographies and exist in a liminal space of their own construction that in turn enables them to create individual narratives that counter fixed Western Orientalist, Neo-Orientalist, and traditional local patriarchal discourses that present them at different historical moments as speechless, subaltern, subservient, and stripped of their agency.

The awareness of the essentializing representation of the image of the Arab woman in literary and cultural discourses has been the motivation pushing me to show how these authors challenge, through their literary representations, both patriarchal authority in their own cultures and Western hegemonic discourses that essentialize Arab women's experiences. Such discourses tend to represent Arab women's lives at different periods in history as intrinsically private and homogeneously speechless. In the texts I analyze, the protagonists often travel alone, as did the authors, and their experiences remain individual and personal, mapping personal geographies where they negotiate their identities among various cultural spaces, places, across borders and identity narratives. Through travel, these protagonists affirm female agency as well as a dynamic disjunctive hybridity that engages the complexities and paradoxes of identity formation upon culture-crossing and moving between national, international, and transnational borders. Because

these authors use travel and journey as a condition to build up their narratives while negotiating different dominant discourses on the Arab woman, mobility and movement become the major components to shaping their responses to varied forms of gendered power structures, imbalanced social order, and misrepresentation and appropriation of their identities. Through travel and journey, these women protagonists go beyond subverting the dominant expectations and discourses about them in the places they settle, to constructing and inscribing a balanced alternative about Arab women's agency. Thus, to read the trope of journey in Arab women's literary narratives as the site of challenge, deconstruction, transformation, and reconstruction of experience and subjectivity illuminates new ways of understanding Arab female agency. Most importantly, the employment of tropes of movement and travel as narrative strategy by these authors deconstructs the traditional dichotomy of male mobility and female stability. Because travel and movement facilitate the emergence of multiple subjectivities among Arab women, it becomes important to analyze this trope in literature written by and about Arab women.

This dissertation closely analyzes and defines the strategies Ghada Samman, Ahdaf Soueif, and Leila Aboulela employ when representing the trope of women's journey and mobility in the selected narratives. Specifically, I argue that these writers present mobility and travel in three different modes that engage the time periods, the geographies, and the socio-historical realities they have experienced.

Ghada Samman employs the trope of departure, escape, and quest as a means to challenging socio-economic ideologies that govern the spatial movement of Arab women. Samman, who was considered part of a generation of woman writers who addressed feminist issues in the novel in addition to the way the socio-economics of their realities determines women's spatial movement, has stressed the importance of "departure" from one's own local

setting to another as a means of challenging societal and economic limitations upon personal freedoms of movement. In her travelogue, for example, once Samman gets introduced to a life of traveling, she makes of it an initial step to escape, search, and explore her personal identity and the places that she visits, just like *The Thousand and One Night's* character, Sinbad (Nabulsi 9).<sup>i</sup> I argue that the mere challenging of these socio-economically imposed norms that have stifled her freedom and the freedom of her protagonist is recognition of the importance of mobility to Arab women in their acquisition of agency.

Ahdaf Soueif constructs and presents a modern/postmodern disjunctive hybrid identity in which the Egyptian woman does not valorize either Egyptian or English culture, location, or identity, but rather engages them equally, allowing a new hybrid identity to be constructed upon an in-between imaginative constructive cultural space that accepts the conflicting paradoxes of this hybrid identity. It is only when travel occurs in Soueif's narrative that a strong female narrative voice and subjectivity emerges independently. Soueif's protagonist initially enjoys mobility and movement because of the upper-middle social class she belongs to. However, as she matures and further travels to London, where she enjoys independence and a private life of her own, she reclaims an independent authority over her life and her hybrid cultural identity. It is important to note that after acquiring this hybrid identity, it will become impossible for the female protagonist in Soueif's novel to fully belong to a single geographic location, creating feelings of alienation that will continue to pervade the protagonist's life even when she decides finally to settle in her country of origin, Egypt.

Leila Aboulela employs the trope of translation as transfer and movement between the protagonists' original homeland (Sudan) and the host land (Scotland and England). Through doing so, she attempts to negotiate the experience of her protagonist. Abouela's protagonists in

*The Translator* and *Minaret*, arguably occupy the place of what could be described as the “Muslimwoman,” a term coined by literary theorist miriam cooke (139), a move that could also be misread as being essentialist. However, Aboulela’s two protagonists engage nuanced and complex identity negotiation through their journeys and so defy fixed representations of female subjectivity. In *The Translator*, Aboulela’s protagonist gains agency from her final ability to translate herself, subjectivity, and worldview, and to connect this agency with a sense of belonging to an Islamic faith-based identity. In *Minaret*, the protagonist’s journey is characterized by a sense of detachment, alienation, and loss until she connects herself to a place that grounds her subjectivity in a sense of belonging, which is her religious identity.

The three authors and their texts in this study demonstrate how movement across borders, both national and international, is a necessary step to constructing a fresh opening for Arab female agency that is both heterogeneous and unique to each individual. The act of movement which the protagonists in the Souief and Aboulela novels and the author-persona in the Samman memoir engage offers mobility in women’s subjectivities that defies any notion of predictability or fixity. Thus, the trope of journey can be read as a subversive, transformative, and reconstructive strategy to express female agency.

In this dissertation I read the trope of journey as a fresh means to representing Arab women agency. The protagonists’/persona’s journeys are ones where these women are in search of personal freedom and individuality, allowing place to transform them on their own terms and also to transform the places they experience to suite their emerging selfhoods. These physical and geographical journeys are what allow these women to experience their subjectivities in a way that would not have been possible without the freedom in movement that allows an unpredictable and unfixed identity. This movement is one that recognizes the heterogeneity and



diversity of experiencing place that necessarily leads to the different ways identities are affected by the places they experience, which leads to dissimilarity and fluidity in identity formation. Thus, the trope and motif of journey becomes an empowering narrative strategy that allows the emergence of multiple and varied ways of representing Arab women's unpredictable and fluid subjectivities and agencies in literary narrative.

### **The Journey Trope in Classical and Modern Arabic Literary Tradition**

When analyzing the journey trope, the narrative strategy to express individual identity used by the selected Arab women authors discussed in this dissertation, it becomes necessary to keep in mind that this trope has been a recurring motif in the classical and modern Arabic literary tradition. The travel genre (*adab al-rihla*)<sup>ii</sup> in Arabic and Islamic literature has been an essential part of Arabic literary production even before the advent of Islam:

This versatile literary vehicle known as the "travel narrative" in the Arab Muslim culture has been in existence since before the advent of Islam. It straddles the genres of *rahil* or *rihla* (journey), *hijra* (migration), and *hajj* (pilgrimage). They all involve individuals' inward and outward mobility for the sake of self-knowledge and self-discovery. *Rahil*, according to the Encyclopedia of Islam, means "a journey, voyage, travel; also a travelogue. (el-Shihibi 2)

Early examples of the employment of *rihla* in Arabic literature are in the pre-Islamic poetic and narrative genres that were concerned with representing themes related to the quest for individual and collective identity. After Islam, the *hijra* and the *hajj rihla* were related in both poetry and prose. One of the earliest examples of the employment of the travel motif in pre-Islamic poetic narratives is the *qasida*, Ode, of Imru al-Qais (540 AD), which was honored by being one of the Hanging Odes or *muallaqat*<sup>iii</sup>. Legendarily, these were judged to be the best poems of their era and hung on the walls of the Ka'ba, in Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula. Following the literary convention of pre-Islamic poetry, and just like other *qasidas* written during that era, Imru al-

Qais' *qasida* incorporates the *rihla* as an integral structural and thematic part of the poetic narrative of the *qasida*, following the *nasib* and preceding the *fakhr* part of the poem.<sup>iv</sup>

The major theme which is characteristic of the pre-Islamic ode is the description of the poet's journey by horse or by camel. This is usually termed the "travel theme." In the section the poet gives an account of his adventures in the wild life of the desert, the hunting scenes, the difficulties he might have experienced and the danger he may have come across. (Bakalla qtd. in el-Shihibi 17)

Both the physical and metaphorical journey is rendered in the *rihla* narrative section of the *qasida* by Imru al-Qais and other poets of the *muallaqat*, such as, Atarah Ibn Shadad, Zuhair bin Abi Sulma, and Amr Ibn Kulthum. The legends about Imru al-Qais, some which are partially rendered in his own *qasida*, are as important as the poem itself; according to these legends, Imru al-Qais was the son of wealthy tribal leader of Banu Assad; he was disowned by his father and ostracized by the ruling elite of the tribe due to his flagrant affairs with women from lower social classes, his illicit poetry, and his reckless lifestyle. He was forced into exile, wandering in the desert and becoming what critics later called "the wandering king" (Arberry qtd. in el-Shihibi 16). However, he then returned and joined the collective cause of his tribe to avenge the murder of his father and the destruction of his tribe after a raid by a neighboring tribe. During his years of wandering, Imru al-Qais wrote *qasidas* that described his travels and journey during his period of exile, which followed the traditional conventions of pre-Islamic *qasidas*, one of which became famous for being part of the *muallaqat*.

The *rihla and quest* narrative was employed in Atarah's *qasida* (525AD), which also involved departure and return journeys, where the poet expressed his individual identity and connected it to the collective identity of his tribe. Atarah's *rihla* and quest were also later related in the popular Arabic *sira* (epic) of Antar Ibn Shadad al-Absi narrated by the persona of his brother, Shaybub, who was also his travel companion. *Sirat Antar*, in its written form, is dated

back to the Mamluk era, sometime between 1080 and 1400, yet it is based on oral legends about the historic pre-Islamic poet Antarah. The epic's national setting is pre-Islamic Arabia and recounts the quasi-historic exploits and journeys of the legendary hero, Antarah, based on historical details, some of which were related in his *qasida* (Irwin 12). This heroic *sira* is an example "of how poetry and prose are woven together with the travel motif functioning as a unifying literary medium" (el-Shihibi 11). From the *sira*, we learn that Antarah, who was the son of an Arab father and an Abyssinian slave mother, was considered an outcast in his own society due to his mother's social status, which made of him a slave in his father's own household.<sup>v</sup> He departed from his tribe because his Arab father, Shaddad, was unwilling to absolve the stigma of Antara's illegitimacy and acknowledge him as a legitimate son (19). The *sira* narrates his travels and quest for personal freedom and identity, as well as his quest for tribal recognition as a full member of society upon proving his prowess in tribal battle, a theme that is also related in his *qasida*. His travel and mobility were directly connected to his attempt to prove his individual identity while seeking to connect to a collective one through heroism; this attempt brought about his emancipation when he saved his tribe from the most destructive attack they had ever faced. El-Shihibi, who analyzes Antara's *sira* as a travel narrative, describes the mixture of his travels and his quest for identity on a personal and collective level:

There are two reasons that make the *sira* of Antara especially significant within the context of the travel or the quest narrative. First, the protagonist unlike other poets, operates in relation to identity on two levels; hence he represents the sentiments of the social outcast as well as the social celebrity. Second, Antara's quests equate the outward mobility with the inward self-emancipation; hence he constitutes a departure from those whose quests enjoy poetic license yet remain closely orbiting the parameters of the collective identity. In other words, what we witness in the *sira* of Antara is an early example of individual identity not only functioning on its own, but also articulating its dissenting ideology. (16)

From this, it could be said that the *sira* is a significant travel poetic and prosaic narrative in the classical Arabic oral literary tradition, which underscores the connection between travel and establishing an individual and tribal identity.

Both the poets, Imru al-Qais and Antarah, in their *qasidas' rihla* sections have expressed independency, individuality, and non-conformity to the laws of their tribes whom at a certain period of time have outcasted them. Thus, what distinguishes Imru al-Qais and Antara's *qasidas* is their divergence from the traditional subject matter of the *qasida*, where they don't engage in panegyrics over their tribe or tribal leaders after their travel narratives, a convention of the *qasida* form which they haven't conformed to; rather, they express their individualism and personal subjectivities without giving credit to their tribes:

What distinguishes the poetry of Antara and Imru al-Qais from the other *mu'allaqat* poets, however, is that their verses employ the travel motif to summon and celebrate the virtues of rugged individualism rather than incessantly dwelling upon the personal traits of those in power. They, in other words, do not subordinate their intellectual perceptions of reality to the sociocultural mores governing the collective consciousness of their respective tribes. (18)

Even though the two poets do finally reintegrate into their tribes and societies, their poetic narratives stress the journey away from society as a primary theme for their personal and individual development. Antara and Imru al-Qais's poetic compositions were most concerned with articulating themes of personal identity and its relations to the collective consciousness of their societies, a theme that will reoccur in the writings of the contemporary Arab women discussed in this dissertation.

Despite the inherent quality in travel themes in the pre-Islamic era, travel narratives after the dawn of Islam by male travelers have changed; subgenres emerged in which *rihlas* became religious, spiritual, or political in orientation. However, el-Shihibi propounds that "the travel or

migratory literature in the Arab-Islamic culture, albeit assuming a higher moral altitude following the migration of the prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Madina (or Yathrib) in the year 622 A.D. to escape persecution at the hands of the Meccan Quraysh tribesmen, also has roots in the pre-Islamic era” (36). After Islam, travel becomes a necessary part of the Muslims’ physical and spiritual identity; it becomes an obligation to perform the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, *the hajj*,<sup>vi</sup> following the footsteps of the prophet Muhammad. Also, the migration of the prophet from Mecca to Madina, the *hijra*, is one that Muslims have emulated. Following his example, they have gone to new places to spread the message of the Islamic faith. The two journeys the prophet and his companions undertook during the establishment of the Islamic faith, in addition to the travels in search of knowledge the prophet encouraged his followers to undertake, all motivated Muslims to start “connecting identity to territory” (cooke xxiii). According to cooke, “the insistence [in Islam] on actual and symbolic travel allows for the simultaneous self-positioning in the local and the global and then back to another local, in the present and past and then back to a transformed present” (xxiii).

Among the widely known travelers in Arabic *adab al-rihalat* during the Medieval Islamic era are Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Battuta, whose journeys have been interpreted by critics as either solely religiously or spiritually inspired travels, or as travels in search of knowledge, *talabu al-ilm*.<sup>vii</sup> According to el-Shihibi, the travel narratives of Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Battuta could be seen to have “integrated the genres of *rihla* (journey), *hijra* (migration), and *hajj* (pilgrimage) into their *hadiths* (narratives), which transmute and transmit their inner and outer progressions” (45). Ibn Jubayr (AD 1145-1217), departing from Granada, Spain, in [1183 AD], and Ibn Battuta (AD 1304-1368), departing from Tangier, Morocco, in [1325 AD], initially began their trips to perform the *hajj*, in Mecca, the Arabian peninsula, and then followed it with a lifetime of travels

to various parts of the world to which the Islamic faith had since spread.<sup>viii</sup> El-Shihibi underscores that even though hajj has been the central travel narrative in Arab Islamic literature, it remains the point of departure connecting the spiritual quest with the searching for an individual and a collective Islamic identity. Despite the different socio-historical contexts of their travels, both Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Battuta's travel narratives blend the *hajj*, the primary travel, with travel in search of knowledge, producing narratives that speak of both an individual and a collective Islamic identity. The main concern of these travelers was to explore the situation of the Islamic nation, though they visited beyond the reaches of Islam, comparing and contrasting such places with Islamic lands, while emphasizing the supremacy of the Islamic cultural and religious identity. Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Battuta, articulate individual, cultural, and religious themes of the travel genre to give a general description of the state of the Islamic community. However, later Arabic travel literature articulates transnational themes that are directly related to the East–West dichotomy, and to East–West encounters and reconciliation.

The generations of modern writers in Arabic literature who have contributed to the travel genre have travelled primarily from their Middle Eastern countries to the West (either Europe or the United States) and have articulated themes related to the East–West encounter. One prominent modern writer who expanded the travel genre in Arabic literary writings is Taha Husayn (1899-1973)<sup>ix</sup> traveled to Paris to pursue his doctoral studies at the Sorbonne. Husayn who began his studies at al-Azhar, then the new Egyptian university, was educated under Egyptian and Western orientalist. According to el-Shihibi, Husayn contributed to the travel genre while articulating themes related to the East–West encounter in his novel, *A Man of Letters: A Western Adventurer* (1935). The novel centered on the disappointment of the protagonist, Adeeb, with his culture; he seeks to understand other cultures, specifically French

culture, which he finds hard to reconcile with his own. Yet the novel ends with Adeb suffering, torn between his version of Western rationalism and Eastern spirituality. This theme recurs in Samman's travelogue and in Aboulela's two novels in this study; the authors tend to blur the differences between their own culture and European culture, questioning the boundaries between the two.

Tayeb Salih, who is considered the father of modern Sudanese fiction, used the travel trope to write directly on the East–West encounter, which is characterized in his seminal novel, *Season of Migration to the North*, by the “clash of civilization” between the formally colonized country, Sudan, and the colonizer, Britain (Ghazoul qtd. in Hassan 1). Salih, who lived the majority of his life an exile in Britain, became part of a generation of postcolonial Arab literary writers and travelers who travelled in the 1950s and 1960s to Europe, received formal education there, and were interested in depicting the aftermath of the East–West<sup>x</sup> encounter. In his writings, Salih presents himself as a witness to British domination over his country, Sudan, and other Middle Eastern countries, as well as the aftermath of that domination on the lives and psychology of the formally colonized people. His quintessential depiction of that encounter is *Season of Migration to the North*, published in 1966, a decade after Sudan achieved independence from the British. The controlling narrative frame in the novel is the journey trope, which makes of the novel a fictional travelogue that is considered by many postcolonial critics, including Edward Said, a form of “writing back” to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which is considered the fictional colonial travel account par excellence (Said qtd. in Smith 1).

In Salih's novel, both the unnamed narrator and the protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed, travel to the North, London specifically, and then back again to the South, Sudan, a journey that involves cultural misperceptions, stereotypes, and postcolonial conflicts between colonizers and

colonized, narrated from the perspective of the colonized. According to the critic Boullata, the novel “emphasizes the political side of the East-West confrontation as internalized by Mustafa Said and perverted into a vengeful feeling expressed in sexual conquests” (Boullata qtd. in Rogers 1). Mustafa Sa’eed, who travels from Sudan to Egypt and then to England, two nations that had colonized Sudan in the past, decides to take his revenge over the history of the British colonization of his country by preying on English women, then leading them to commit suicide, a triumphant moment for him. However, he is defeated in London when he is sentenced to prison for seven years for killing his English wife, Jean Morris. Upon returning to his village in Sudan, Sa’eed keeps the secret of his rise and defeat in London away from the people, keeping a book he wrote of his former life in London in a secret room that later is accessed by the narrator upon Sa’eed’s disappearance. The depiction of Sa’eed’s journey to London and back to Sudan, a journey riddled with conflicts, clashes, and a final defeat, represents “the failure of [Salih’s] generation to find adequate answers to the challenge of postcolonial nationhood” (Hassan 299).<sup>xi</sup>

The 1988 Nobel prize winner, Nagub Mahfouz, has been one of the prominent modern literary writers to connect *adab al-rihla* in Arabic literature to the modern Arabic travel genre in the twentieth century. *The Journeys of Ibn Fattouma* is Mahfouz’ parody of Ibn Battuta’s travelogue. Mahfouz sends the traveler, Ibn Fattouma, from his Islamic country, where he is disillusioned and disappointed, to seek self-knowledge in other lands beyond the reach of Islam. The imagined global travels Ibn Fattouma embarks on reflects the nature of its modern era, where Mahfouz, without elevating any society, culture, or religion, underscores the fact that the history of humanity is a travel metaphor that is everlasting. For Mahfouz, employing the travel genre in literature becomes a means to representing the cosmopolitan uprootedness of modern man.



Among the most prominent Arab woman writers whose works could be considered part of the body of narratives about the female journey in modern Arab *adab al-rihla* are feminist and political activist Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947) from Egypt, and poet and autobiographer Fadwa Tuqan (1913-2003) from Palestine. Sha'rawi's autobiography, abridged and translated as *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, details how she was brought up in and married into the upper social strata of Egyptian society of her time and how she later became a political activist and feminist, establishing the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923 (Golley 35). In the autobiography, Sha'rawi offers glimpses of her journeys and trips to Europe, where she spoke at women's conferences and addressed feminist activism related to Egypt. Sha'rawi's travels allowed her to grow as an Egyptian nationalist and political activist, and a prominent Arab feminist; upon her return to Egypt, she renounced her face veil, a revolutionary act for a woman of her social stratum during that time period.<sup>xii</sup> Likewise, Fadwa Tuqan's autobiography published in 1984, *A Mountainous Journey, A Difficult One*,<sup>xiii</sup> narrates Tuqan's life experience, starting with her birth into a privileged, conservative, upper-class Palestinian family, continuing through the wars that took place in Palestine, including the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, and finally to her becoming a prominent poet who travelled to Europe, specifically England, in the early 1960s to pursue her education at Oxford University. During her journey to England, she documents her perception of the English people and the way she felt displaced amongst them. Even though she and her family resisted the British mandate over Palestine, she still admired England, seeing it as a place of knowledge, progress, and civilization. Thus she moves there to further her formal education despite her mixed feelings towards it: "It is the love/hate relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. Although England featured as the hateful enemy of the Palestinians in her memoirs, nevertheless England was a desirable destination for

renewal, knowledge and discovery” (Attar 3). Both Sha’rawi and Tuqan resisted the English occupation of their countries, yet they traveled to Europe to gain knowledge that would finally become an essential part of their self-empowerment and self-actualization as strong Arab women. In the case of these writers, travel offered them a means to reconcile their nationalistic priorities with their own self-subjectivities and gendered identity.

Other contemporary Arab woman writers have contributed to *adab al-rihla*, such as the prominent Arab feminist Nawal al-Sa’dawi. In her travelogue, *My Travels Around the World* (1986), al-Sa’dawi fuses the travel trope in Arabic literature with a gendered Arab female experience of traveling around the world and registering her observations as well as perceptions of the places she visits. Al-Sa’dawi’s travelogue begins with her departure from her homeland, Egypt, claiming that the only means to challenge traditional patriarchal authority is to depart from the limited boundaries of home. The moment of departure she experiences is challenging: Her journey challenges her from the beginning: the government delays her departure by demanding permission from her husband before she can depart from Cairo; however, once she presents documentation that she is divorced they allow her to travel (al-Sa’dawi 8). After managing to depart, she continuously stresses the importance of subverting the societal constructed boundaries between the private and public sphere through adopting movement and mobility as a lifestyle. It is important to note that just like al-Sa’dawi, Samman suffered when departing from her homeland because she failed to acquire governmental permission to travel to Europe.<sup>xiv</sup> The problematic moment of departure has been a recurring theme in Arab women’s travelogues and literary travel narratives because women have generally been associated with domestic stasis, while men are associated with adventurous movement and exploration.

Some of the themes el-Sa'dawi underscores after her initial departure and during her trips from Egypt, to Europe, to India, and then to Africa, are related to the socio-political, socio-cultural realities of the places she visits. She also pays specific attention to local and universal issues concerning women. Aside from reporting her observations and informing the reader about her own perceptions of the places she visits, al-Sa'dawi also explores how her travels affect the way she views her identity in a positive way: "Al-Sadawi perceives identity as being formulated in a much wider scope that transcends both national and ethnic boundaries" (141). She describes how her travels change the way she looks at individual identity: "Individual identity or individual responsibility is inseparable from social identity or social responsibility, and the word identity is a positive word, like democracy and freedom" (el-Sa'dawi qtd. in el-Shihibi 142).

In sum, the journey trope in classical and modern Arabic literature has been employed by both male and female writers for different purposes that were dictated by the time periods they experienced and their individual circumstances. The inscription of journey in classical and medieval Arabic literature was mainly done by male poets and writers; they describe their gendered experiences, including masculine adventures, exploration, and the quest for an individual identity and individuality that could be finally connected to a communal identity. Modern Arabic literature employing the travel and journey motif have expanded on the classic mode of journey to include the cultural encounter between the Middle East and the West (mainly Europe), cultural alienation and clashes, and the resolutions of such encounters. Modern and contemporary woman writers who employed the journey trope in their autobiographical and fictional narratives illuminate new meanings connected to the representation of gendered experience of place and the disruption of societal expectations once such movement occurs from her locale to another. As opposed to travel narratives written by men, who focus on connecting

their individual identities with a communal one, woman writers and travelers have expressed female subjectivity and a strong agency through negotiating the relationship between movement and the construction of a highly personalized individual identity.

My dissertation aims at analyzing a selection that includes both a narrative about real travels (Samman's travelogue) and fictionalized travel narratives written by women who use the travel trope as a means to representing an alternative perspective on issues related to Arab women's experience of place, both home and abroad, and its effects on the representation of their subjectivities and identities in a globalized world defined by different modes of movement and travel. Using the journey trope as an alternative mode to express Arab female subjectivity and agency in literary narrative, whether autobiographical or fictional, Arab women writers reclaim their own narratives, which have for so long been told by others. The trope of female journey and travel provides Arab woman writers with both a means to subvert conventional accounts of defining Arab women's subjectivities and a means to reclaim their own agency through movement and travel.

## **The Authors and Texts**

### **Ghada Samman**

Ghada Samman was born in Damascus, Syria in 1942. Her mother died when she was very young, leaving her to be raised by her father and her paternal grandmother, who worked all her life as a seamstress to support her children's education, and from whom Ghada admits that she learned independence at a very early age (Nabulsi 13). Samman's father was an academic who had acquired his PhD from the Sorbonne in political economics, worked as a university professor at Damascus University, and then became the Minister of Education in the early 1960s.

Though her father was educated in France, he was highly interested in Arabic folklore and literature, an interest he extended to Ghada at an early age. According to Nabulsi, Samman grew up during her early years in a conservative Damascene society of the 1940s and 1950s, an experience that she admits has colored her writings about Damascus generally (14). She is an acclaimed journalist, novelist, short-story writer, and poet whose writings have been translated into several languages, including Spanish, Russian, English and French, which has made of her a widely read Arab woman author in the Arab world as well as countries who read her works in translation. However, when reading Samman's texts and contexts, one has to be aware that Samman's target readership initially was mainly Arab as she insisted on writing in Arabic and to an Arab readership.

She earned her BA from the University of Damascus in 1963 and then left for Beirut, Lebanon, to pursue an MA in English theatre from the American University in Beirut, where she wrote her master's thesis on the Theatre of the Absurd (Al Waref 1). There her career as a journalist and literary writer was established, and she never returned to Syria. She moved to London to work on a PhD in English literature, a degree she never earned because of the shift of interest from academia to journalism, and thus she traveled around Europe, working as a journalist. She finally settled in Paris after the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war. Currently, she travels between Paris and her other home in Beirut. Her constant traveling during her work as a journalist and her later traveling between her two homes highly influenced her writings, where she addresses cross-cultural issues and cultural alienation in both fiction and travelogue.

Among the issues that have preoccupied Samman's personal life and writings have been the Lebanese civil war, class issues, social alienation, oppressive patriarchy, and feminism. Her novel *Beirut 75* (1975) is about a city on the verge of civil war. The novel addresses the social,

political, class and bureaucratic decadence of Beirut during that time period. However, the horrors of that war, which plunged Lebanon into sectarian strife for about a decade, tearing apart the very fabric of society and highlighting the oppressive elements within Lebanese society, she addresses in her later novel *Beirut Nightmares* (1976). In her collection of travel accounts, *The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase* (1979), which is the first among five other travelogues she writes, Samman recounts her trips between different countries in Europe, and several Arab countries, detailing her observations of her surroundings, as well as how these observations affected her perception of herself and the places she visited. In her five other travelogues that follow, Samman continues to recount her experiences traveling through Europe, several Asian countries, and America, escaping and lamenting the civil war taking place back in Beirut.

In her fiction, which, to some degree, is shaped by her personal experiences<sup>xv</sup>, she uses travel as a form of both escape and search: an escape from war and/or an oppressive economic and social reality that both she and her protagonists refuse to abide, and a search for an individuality that is directly linked to liberating the Arab woman from both economic and social repressive elements in Arab societies. Throughout her writings, she displays an unwavering revolutionary feminist attitude, claiming a sexual revolution<sup>xvi</sup> is necessary to end the way Arab patriarchy was dominant according to her personal experience. Most importantly, Samman claims that a sexual revolution should be “part and parcel of a general revolution of the Arab individual to retrieving his/her freedoms, part of which includes economic freedoms, political freedoms, and intellectual freedoms” (Samman qtd. in Nabulsi 80).<sup>xvii</sup>

## ***Beirut 75***

Set a year prior to the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, *Beirut 75* illustrates the decadence, power abuse, bureaucracy, economic and social corruption that plague Lebanese society at the time. It is a narrative that focuses mainly on the separate journeys the two protagonists, Yasmeena and Farah, take to Beirut, a place they hope will offer them social, economic, and sexual liberation far from Damascus, the city they escape. Leaving the restricted life and jobs they had in Syria, Yasmeena and Farah dream of the abundance of opportunities and a bright future Beirut will offer them. However, the journey is fraught with menacing incidents, foreshadowed by three veiled women dressed in black occupying the back seat of the cab and beginning with a flat tire, which in turn foreshadows the total destruction of both protagonists in Beirut. Instead of Beirut being the city of freedom, and endless economic opportunities, it becomes a grave for the female protagonist and a mental asylum for the male protagonist. The sexual, economic, political, and bureaucratic decadence that plague Beirut during that time period, all together operate as the reasons behind the failure of the protagonist to gain their agency and freedom.

As Farah and Yasmeena arrive in Beirut in the cab, their routes diverge, as they search for better economic opportunities in the alluring city. Yasmeena, who searches for riches, love, and sexual freedom, gets introduced to the son of a wealthy Lebanese business man, Nimr, who showers her with wealth and sexual satisfaction, but only temporarily. Even though Yasmeena's voyage to Beirut offers her sexual fulfillment, it does not change the fact that on a wider social front, sexual liberation is linked to economic and political liberation, aspects lacking in Lebanese society at the time. At a certain point, she becomes dangerously addicted to sex and overly obsessed with the lavish lifestyle she had been deprived of before she reached Lebanon. This

sexual enjoyment and the money she is offered present Yasmeena moments of liberation; however, at the end they both are major factors that bring about her doom.

### ***The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase***

Published in 1979, *The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase* covers a period of twelve years of Samman's life, starting from her first travel to London to pursue her PhD in English literature in 1964 and continuing through her travels to several European countries as a reporter and a creative writer. During these travels, she assumes the role of both observer and critic, evaluating the different cultures with which she comes in contact. It is during these particular travels that she assumes a detached position and experiences Europe, as well as Syrian and Lebanon as both an insider and an outsider. However, Samman is disappointed throughout her trips in Europe, especially in London where she notices that the media and mainstream discourse about the Arab world is biased. She finds that it is difficult for her to connect to Europe or to ignore such discourses. Samman partially blames the Arabs for not being able to defend themselves and their image before Europe and their media, but then she realizes that such discourses are related to the imbalanced power structure between the Middle East and England. The travelogue is colored with a pessimistic tone towards the end, where Samman finds herself forced to settle in Lebanon temporarily until she is forced to leave because of the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war. Also, during the travelogue, Samman falls victim of stereotypically observing the people, traditions and cultures of the Other according to preconceived descriptions, not being able to free herself from making "home" the point of departure when evaluating the Other.

### **Ahdaf Soueif**



Born in Cairo in 1950 to upper-middle-class, academic parents, Dr. Fatima Mousa and Dr. Mustafa Soueif, who both studied in England and then returned to Egypt to teach at the University of Cairo. Ahdaf Soueif received her education in both Egypt and England. She is a novelist, short-story writer, and commentator on socio-political and cultural affairs in both England and Egypt. Soueif lived part of her childhood in England, while her mother was obtaining a PhD at the University of London. Soueif got her MA in English literature at the American University in Cairo in 1973, and then left for England in the same year to pursue her PhD in linguistics at the University of Lancaster. She has taught at several universities in both Egypt, including the University of Cairo. Currently, she writes regularly for the *Guardian* in the UK and a weekly column for *al-Shorouk* in Egypt. She lives between England and Egypt, both places she considers home.

As Soueif lives in two worlds, Egypt and England, occupying a “third space” that is uniquely personal and hybrid, her writings also oscillate between those two worlds. Even though she writes her fiction primarily in English, she employs hybrid literary techniques and linguistic expressions to reflect both her Egyptian and English hybridity (Abdul-Halim 1). Among her Anglo-Arab contemporaries who write on issues related to hybridity are Fadia Faqir, Zeina Ghandour, Sabiha al-Khemir, and Leila Aboulela, all of whom live between their Arab homelands and Britain (Al Maleh 13). This hybridity, which is an intrinsic part of Soueif’s personal identity and writings, allows her to operate within a third space that encompasses a diverse range of thematic expressions. Among the themes she writes on are gender issues, sexuality, cultural alienation, and tensions and interaction that arises from living in two worlds, Egypt and England. In her collections of short stories, *Aisha* (1983) and *Sandpiper* (1996), and her two novels, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) and *The Map of Love* (1999), Soueif has her female

protagonists travel between Egypt and England, where they negotiate borderlines, carving unique hybrid identities that allow them to take control of their own personal lives and narratives. Likewise, Soueif herself is a traveler between the Egypt and England who links her actual movement between these two worlds to movement in her texts, fictionalizing her journey and focusing on the ways in which her personal travel shapes her dynamic textual creations.<sup>xviii</sup>

Among Soueif's journalistic and theoretical writings is *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground* (2004), a collection of essays written over twenty-five years. Among the issues she writes on in this non-fictional book is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, socio-political commentary on both Egypt and England, and criticism of religious, social, and political conflicts between the Arab world and Western countries. Initially, she constructs a theory about a theoretical time and place that represents the hybrid spirit of Cairo of the 1960s, which she calls "Mezzaterra," a "common place" where cultures and traditions meet and inform one another, creating a middle ground<sup>xix</sup> of knowledge and positive interaction. However, she laments the disappearance of this Mezzaterra as the 1980s and 1990s roll in with the political and military powers in the world move greatly out of balance: "[the] political direction the world was taking seemed to undermine every aspect of this identity" (8). In addition, Soueif published her personal reflections and account on the recent Egyptian revolution of 2011 in her book, *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2012). In this journalistic account, Soueif reflects on the first few month of the revolution and the initial hopes of the possible changes that could ensue in Egyptian politics and society as a result.

In addition, Soueif translated two works from Arabic to English, one of which is Mourid Barghouthi's memoir, *I Saw Ramallah*.<sup>xx</sup> It is important to note that Soueif has not written her

own personal narrative of return but has chosen to translate Barghouthi's narrative of exile and return.

### *In the Eye of the Sun*

Published in 1992, *In the Eye of the Sun* has been hailed by critics including Edward Said as a successful bridge between two different cultures, the Egyptian and the English. Said celebrates Soueif's employment of the *hijra* or, in Egyptian dialect, "*hegra*"<sup>xxi</sup>, an emigration trope, wherein the protagonist, Asya al-Ulama, acquires a complex hybrid identity of her own construction. In the novel, Asya is born to an upper-middle-class Egyptian family of the 1960s, a time characterized by openness to English language and culture. Thus, Asya is brought up in a hybrid cultural space, Mezzaterra. Later, she leaves Egypt for England to pursue her PhD. Her journey to England is laden with transcultural exchange. Once in England, Asya is exposed to different cultural experiences that plunge her into negotiating her experiences both in Egypt and in England, an attempt to investigate and reconstruct a hybrid identity she feels comfortable with. However, her initial upbringing in a hybrid Egyptian social class makes Asya inclined to engaging different experiences early in her life.

Asya's first chance at leaving Egypt, to Italy first and then to Beirut, expose her to sexuality and sexual encounters with a foreign man and then with her lover, Saif, in a way that was never possible back home. After returning to Egypt and after being engaged to Saif for three years, Asya marries him. The marriage is never sexually consummated, a fact that will finally result in the deterioration of the relationship, leading finally to a divorce between the couple. During the complications surrounding her marriage, Asya leaves for England to pursue her PhD. While in England, Asya has an affair with an English man, Gerald Stone, who provides her with

emotional and sexual satisfaction, even if for a short period of time. Aside from being exposed to different sexual and gendered discourses both in Egypt and England, Asya also experiences her individual independence in England away from people and the cultural pressure that used to dictate her life, which in return allows her to regain a strong personal voice and agency, reclaiming an authority over her own life. During her physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological journeys, Asya gets exposed to different experiences that contribute to her acquiring a hybrid identity that is uniquely Egyptian and English simultaneously.

### **Leila Aboulela**

Leila Aboulela, an Egyptian Sudanese writer, was born in Cairo in 1964 and grew up in Khartoum, her family's original home. She was first educated in Sudan, where she attended the Khartoum American School. She obtained her BA in economics from Khartoum University in 1985, then pursued an MS in statistics at the London School of Economics. She is an acclaimed Arab novelist, and a short-story writer. Her writings engage, negotiate, and confront Islamic, Orientalist, and Western discourses and stereotypes that mainly misrepresent and dictate the Muslim woman identity. Her female protagonists challenge essentialist and reductionist labeling of their characters, even when assuming an Islamic-based identity, since they are dynamic characters whose cross-cultural experiences inform the nuanced details of their acquired identity.

*The Translator*, Aboulela's first novel, written and published in English in 1999, was longlisted for the Orange Prize in 2000 and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards in 2001. The novel addresses issues related to the translation of self, culture, place, and religion upon encountering a foreign land. Aboulela's second novel, *Minaret*, published in 2005, also written in English, is a story about dislocation, migration, Islamic religious and spiritual struggle, and

exile in Britain. It was also longlisted for the Orange Prize and the IMPAC Literary Award. In addition, Aboulela wrote a collection of short stories, *Coloured Lights*, published in 2001, which also engages the experience of Muslim African immigrants moving between Sudan and Scotland or England. The fictionalized journeys registered in Aboulela's works portray female protagonists facing cross-cultural encounters as well as personal struggles with faith and spirituality while living in the West. Aboulela now lives and travels between Abu Dhabi and Aberdeen. Her latest novel is *Lyrics Alleys*, published in 2010, which follows the life of a family relocated in Cairo after the stirring up of tension in Sudan before the country's independence from British rule.

### ***The Translator***

*The Translator* tells the story of Sammar, who travels from Khartoum to Aberdeen, in order to work as a translator of Arabic documents into English for an acclaimed Scottish university professor and scholar of Middle Eastern history and postcolonial studies, Rae Isles. She not only translates texts for Rae, she also falls in love with him—a love that eventually is consummated after Rae converts to Islam. As the novel unfolds and through flashbacks, we learn that she has traveled to Aberdeen in the past with a husband who was pursuing a medical degree, but who was killed in a car accident, after which she returns to Sudan. While in Sudan, she is prevented by her mother-in-law from accepting any marriage proposals, because her mother-in-law blames her for the death of her son (Sammar's husband), and believes that Sammar should dedicate her time to raising Sammar's son—a son whom Sammar wishes had died in the car accident instead of his father.

The two journeys Sammar takes in her past and present from Khartoum to Aberdeen are reflected in the back-and-forth temporal setting that illustrates two dimensions in her personal growth: her reclaiming her voice to face the oppressive elements of her life back in Sudan, namely her mother-in-law, and the other, her growing out of the oppositional paradigm that marks her as the Other in the West, namely when Rae converts to Islam instead of Sammar compromising her religious worldview. While Sammar learns how to insert herself into the West as an independent woman with an Islamic worldview, donning a *hijab* or Islamic headcovering, facing both Islamic traditional and orientalist Western discourses about the Muslim Arab woman, she learns that the way to do so is by making the West a place that could be home, despite the Arab and Sudanese cultural baggage that still marks her as different. Aboulela's narrative conclusion in the novel, wherein Sammar has neither to assimilate to Western culture by adopting a secular worldview nor to conform to a traditional Sudanese cultural worldview, offers a new path for the mobile Muslim woman, who both embraces her independence and finds strength in applying her religious/spiritual worldview to make out of the West a home.

### ***Minaret***

In *Minaret*, Aboulela continues to investigate issues of gender, sexuality, religious identity, and the West. Najwa, a Sudanese Muslim woman forced into exile in Britain, negotiates her past, as an aristocratic, secular Westernized woman living in Sudan, and her present, as a practicing Muslim working as a housemaid for a rich Arab woman. The novel consists of five chapters that shift systematically between Najwa's past in Sudan and her present exile in London. This temporal and geographic discontinuity and shifting is significant, as Aboulela allows the reader to actively participate in not only the physical journey Nawja takes, but also

her fall from one social status to another, from adapting a Western lifestyle to an Islamic one, and from being attached to the material life to the spiritual.

We learn from the prologue that Najwa has undergone an Islamic and spiritual awakening that separates her from her previous life in Sudan, as well as from her previous self as the daughter of a corrupt politician-businessman. Then, in chapter 1, and as the rest of the chapters follow, we journey with her back and forth between her past and present. We learn about her life in Sudan prior to the 1985 coup that led to her father's execution and her exile in London with her mother and her twin brother Omar. Prior to this, Najwa's family had lived a life of leisure defined by Western standards of secular materialism. At the university, she had fallen in love with Anwar, a student activist who was part of the political party that would overthrow the "corrupt" government, including Najwa's father. Najwa's girlfriends at the university had been from her same social class, their sole interest being to live a materialistic lifestyle, as shown by the clothes they purchased, the private parties they threw, and their vacations in Europe. As Najwa's circle of friends at the university had belonged to the secular, upper-class, urban strata of Sudanese society, she had been intrigued by the more traditional female students who donned traditional headscarves and *thawbs* (traditional Sudanese women's dresses).

After the government is overthrown and Najwa's father is arrested and executed, she is displaced in London and becomes a poor woman who has to face the hardships of life, including becoming a maid for rich Arab families. However, Najwa starts to recollect herself once she reconnects with the Muslim community at the local mosque in her area. From that moment on, Najwa undergoes a religious and spiritual awakening that contributes to her final self-empowerment. For Najwa, the secular West becomes the space where she sees her identity as

essentially Muslim. It is not her faith-based identity that defines her, but rather the nuanced, complex negotiation between different elements in her life.

### **Dissertation Structure**

My analysis of the trope of journey, travel, and mobility in the life and work of Ghada Samman, and the works of Ahdaf Soueif, and Leila Aboulela is centered on the time periods the authors engage and write in. It is important to contextualize the modes of travel the authors employ and the way they negotiate specific socio-historic discourses, while engaging the overlapping discourses on Arab women during the eras they address.

Every chapter in the dissertation features a selection of work/s of an author, in which each author engages the social context, gendered power structures, and dominant discourses at home and abroad about the Arab woman during their time periods, as well as the theoretical responses to such discourses. These authors use travel as their narrative device, engaging identity politics and negotiating the provisional cultural spaces and places that play into the construction of their protagonists' subjectivities. The subjectivities the authors create, construct, and represent suggest that the narratives are dependent on and respond to the dominant discourses on the Arab woman represented. Thus, I have decided that the temporal arrangement of the chapters is necessary in order to illustrate specific discourses and how they correspond to social contexts that misrepresent Arab women at times.

The authors and the selected literary texts are not meant to be representative of only the preoccupations of the Arab woman writers and the issues they explore. Rather, the selection is premised upon how these authors' preoccupations in their personal lives as well as literary writings represent the journey trope. To read the trope of mobility and travel in these narratives



as the site of challenge, deconstruction, construction, and reconstruction of the myriad subjectivity positions Arab women adopt illuminates new ways of understanding Arab female agency. Most importantly, the authors employ the trope of travel as narrative strategy to deconstruct the traditional dichotomy of male mobility and female domesticity.

The first chapter in this dissertation defines moments of departure from the economic and socio-political ideologies governing women's travel and mobility during the mid-1970s, the decade during which Ghada Samman wrote her travel accounts and the time period she represents in her literary writings. This chapter defines the departure, escape, and quest tropes that the author employs in two works, *The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase* and *Beirut 75*. The departure and quest the female protagonist/persona experience represent moments of feminist recognition and awareness of the economic, socio-political, cultural, and sexual restrictions and limitations facing these women, whether persona or protagonist. The females in both works challenge the dominant societal expectations of female mobility. Even though the writer and protagonist in this chapter are defined by a sense of escape from the status quo to explore the limitations that are authorized by the economic, political, sexual, and gendered social order, the mere challenging of societal expectations remains revolutionary. The awareness of both the internal and external conflicts which Arab females were challenging and negotiating during that time period becomes an initial step to the acknowledgment of the importance of mobility and travel in their acquiring agency.

The second chapter investigates the possibility of an alternative vision of Arab women's subjectivities as deployed in Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*. I analyze how journey and mobility tropes in Soueif's works offer an alternative representation and new possibilities for expressing identity and agency, where her female protagonist reconstructs a subjectivity that is

hybrid and intensely individual based on both her hybrid cultural experience back home in Egypt, and her later temporal relocation in England.

The third chapter illustrates how a member of a new generation of cosmopolitan Arab Muslim women literary writers post 9/11 has been exploring, negotiating, and challenging Islamic, Orientalist, and Western discourses about the fluid identities of Muslim woman. My main concern in this chapter is to show how Leila Aboulela represents the concept of Muslimwoman in the construction of her female protagonists' subjectivity in *The Translator* and *Minaret*, both novels where she creates independent protagonists, who negotiate a cross-cultural life in the Sudan and Europe. The personal, individual subjectivities her protagonists acquire are informed by both their cross-cultural experiences and their experience as Muslim women in both Sudan and Scotland/England. In Aboulela's novels the Muslimwoman construction is one that is challenged and negotiated, as the complex cross-cultural experiences of her protagonists are what mainly inform their identities even when they finally assume a religious identity as one dimension of their multi-layered subjectivity.

Through this temporal arrangement of chapters, I examine how the narrative trope of women's mobility and travel engages aspects of the social context that informs Samman, Soueif, and Aboulela's writings. Each writer approaches the trope of journey and travel in several key modes that correspond with certain socio-political moments that affect women's lives, negotiating the ever-changing social position and subjectivity of their protagonists. The different and varied modes of the trope of female mobility and journey that I analyze in the selected works engage and/or challenge the overlapping dominant ideological discourses on the Arab woman during the last succeeding decades. Yet the construction of a subjectivity that is ever developing and changing is best represented through the trope of mobility and travel.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This dissertation makes use of postcolonial feminist theory, Arab feminism, postcolonialism, and travel writings and theories. Since it addresses the trope of women's mobility and travel, primarily moving from an Arab country to a European one, except in the case of Yasmeena, as experienced by Arab woman authors and their protagonists, the primary general theoretical framework that has been useful in my analysis is postcolonial feminism, the premise of which deals with the intersection between the postcolonial experience and the gendered experience of women in the formerly colonized Third World. Specific to my dissertation is the Arab woman's experience. Since the Arab woman authors and protagonists in the texts I analyze are mobile, journeying not only between national borders but international ones, primary between the Middle East and Europe, they not only challenge Orientalist misrepresentations of their lives, but they also challenge existing gendered ideologies within their own cultures and the dominant Western discourses that propose to "know" who the Arab woman is.

Travel theory has been useful to my overall reading of the trope of journey in Arab women's narratives for understanding the formation of identity and the various ways movement and journey affect the expression and representation of personal and cultural identity. The journey trope complicates the relationship between identities, belonging, and home in the literary narratives I analyze, where journey becomes a means to creating new spaces of belonging within or away from one's place of origin. Trinh T. Minh-ha's theorization on the representation of the "self" and "other" when traveling and their relationship to belonging and language in her article "Other than myself/my other self" deconstructs the dichotomous way of the expression of self and the perception of otherness. The trope of journey in this dissertation highlights how the

conception of the self undergoes transformation in ways that incorporate what a person once has thought of as “otherness” in order to cope with the new setting the protagonist/persona experiences. Thus, identity formation is a fluid process that takes into account the unstable boundaries between the self and the other.

The metaphor “travel as writing and writing as travel”<sup>xxii</sup> which Michael Butor proposes in his theorization on travel writing is one that is useful to my analysis of Samman’s *The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase*. Samman’s goal behind writing her travelogue is to represent her journey experiences as a travel journal because from the start, she sets out on her travels in order to document them in writing, illustrating the relationship between travel and writing that Butor proposes. Also, the concept and metaphor of “Narrative is Travel” developed by travel theorist Kai Mikkonen is useful to my reading of Samman’s travelogue since Samman in her introduction invites the readers to participate in her travels by choosing a title that best describes the travelogue from a list of titles she provides. The act of speaking directly to the readers of her travelogue is significant since through this act, Samman invites the reader to participate not only in the reading process, but also in the travels themselves. Thus, to read Samman’s travelogue is to travel with her on her journey through the various countries she visits and to register her experiences of place as if they were the readers’ own.

Moreover, my analysis engages feminist, postcolonial, and feminist postcolonial concepts and tropes developed by theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Chandra Mohanty, Amal Amireh, Leila Ahmed, and miriam cooke. Edward Said’s initial deconstruction of the contested imaginative borders separating the Occident and the Orient in his seminal book, *Orientalism*, provides an initial theoretical point of departure for my examination of identity formation across different geographic and cultural boarders. This dissertation takes into account the instability of

categories such as “East,” “West,” as these constructions are ever shifting and instable imagined cultural and geographic boundaries. The trope of journey this dissertation highlights is one that underscores the instability of these categories and participates in the discussion about the constantly shifting boundaries between these imagined geographic and cultural borderlines. This discussion informs my analysis of the fluid representation of the cross-cultural experiences and subjectivities of Arab women. Also, Said’s claims that identity is never viewed as ahistorical, monolithic, “pure,” or static informs my approach; I read the trope of female journey as a strategy to deconstruct the very notion of a monolithic, essentialized, and static Arab female subjectivity. Arab women’s identities are multi-layered, multi-dimensional, ever changing, and shaped and reshaped by the experiences they go through. The subjectivities I analyze are unfixed, fluid, and constantly changing, according to the experiences of movement that change them.

In addition, since this is a gendered study concerning the construction, conception, and representation of the Arab female subjectivity in literature and literary discourse, I make use of Spivak and Mohanty’s literary theories on issues of misrepresentation. Dominant discourses of power in both past and present have represented the Arab Muslim woman as essentially submissive, oppressed, silent, undereducated, and static. Even mainstream Western feminist discourses have also contributed and perpetuated that image with the assumption that women, as a universal category, are essentially the same and demand the same freedoms and rights (Mohanty 338). This premise fails because it generalizes the concerns and priorities of Western feminists in a way that obscures the priorities of women from other cultures and societies. The authors of the literary works I analyze complicate every representation and image of the Arab woman that has appeared in dominant discourse by constructing single subjectivities that are

multilayered, heterogeneous, and ever evolving, women who speak on their own terms and have a voice that marks them as individuals.

In her highly influential article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” postcolonial feminist Chandra Mohanty highlights the problems Western feminism has representing the Third World woman. Mohanty argues that Western feminism in its intervention, supposedly to assist women of the Third World in their struggles, has instead assisted imperialism in its exploitation of gender as a justification for imperialism. Also, the way Western feminism categorizes all women in one homogenous generalized category under the banner of “global sisterhood,” assuming that the experience of women is the same worldwide and that their feminist priorities are therefore common to all, is a fallacy. These same concerns that Mohanty expresses in her article are those that push Arab woman writers to engage in their own writings the representation of the varied experiences of Arab women and the strategies of self-representation they engage.

In addition, Homi Bhabha’s concepts of “hybridity” and “third-space,” which he developed in *The Location of Culture* (1994), have been major concepts the three writers, especially Souief and Aboulela, engage while creating their protagonists and constructing their narratives. In the literary works I analyze, boundaries of “the East,” represented as the original homelands Sudan and Egypt, and “the West,” represented mainly as Britain and Scotland, meet and blur at times because the journeys the authors and their protagonists take between those two worlds defy any fixed notion of experience and subjectivity. For Bhabha, hybridity is the process in which the colonial authority tries to render the identity of the colonized, the Other, within a fixed framework but then fails, producing “not self and other but the otherness of the self” (44). Then he goes on, stating that hybridity is a form of “in-betweenness,” where “the cutting edge of

negotiation and translation” occupies a “third space” (9). What is unique about this third space is that it blurs the limitations of existing boundaries, dismantles any hierarchal positioning, and calls into question established notions of culture and identity. The space a subject occupies is “an ambivalent site” where cultural meaning and representation have no “primordial unity of fixity” (9). Both Aboulela and Soueif produce narratives that represent hybrid experiences where the protagonist move from Egypt and Sudan, to Britain and Scotland, yet the ways the hybrid experience is tackled in these works are different. In this third space, the boundaries of identities and cultures are brought into question, destabilized, and reconstructed to form a new alternative, one that is hybrid and, in a sense, cosmopolitan. For example, in *In the Eye of the Sun*, Soueif’s protagonist travels between Egypt and Britain, where she negotiates the borderlines of these two spaces against her individual identity, carving a unique hybrid identity that does not valorize any specific cultural experience over another, and defining herself rather in terms of the unresolved paradoxes that blur her cultural experiences.

Furthermore, the term Muslimwoman is useful when analyzing the works of Leila Aboulela and the way she constructs and represents her female protagonists’ experiences and subjectivities. Aboulela represents this concept in the construction of her female protagonists’ subjectivity in *The Translator* and *Minaret*, yet deconstructing the dominant orientalist, Western, and Islamic traditional discourses on the Arab Muslim woman. I argue that Aboulela’s female protagonists derive their agency from negotiating the Muslimwoman identity against their complex experiences of place, and they eventually construct their individual, personal subjectivities out of this engagement. Yet, one should be aware that employing the concept of “the Muslimwoman” could be easily misread as either esseintialzing the experience of Muslim women or essentializing the types of narratives written and produced by Muslim women. It is

important to note that when I read Aboulela's narratives through the concept of the Muslimwoman, I tend to analyze them as part of the varied corpus of literary narratives written by and about Muslim women. While Aboulela's narratives could be misread as essentializing Muslim women experiences, I read them as individual narratives that add up to the varied representations of Muslim women's experiences.

Moreover, Amal Amireh and Lisa Majaj's book *Going Global: The Transitional Reception of Third World Women Writers* is especially useful to my overall analysis of the challenges that face Arab authors as their texts travel from the Middle East to Europe and the United States. The challenges and obstacles that face these contemporary Arab woman authors who address an international audience are serious, since these women always have to compete with the grounded stereotypical images of the Arab Muslim woman that appear in the dominant discourses and literary productions in the West; these reduce the Arab Muslim woman to either an exotic figure or a figure that needs to be saved. Facing these stereotypes and misrepresentations becomes challenging for these authors, who are concerned with constructing Arab female subjectivities that are intensely personal and individual, while negotiating misrepresentations of their images and experiences. Yet these woman authors do not allow any set of discourse to manipulate their representations, instead creating unique narratives that represent the Arab woman experiences as unique and intensely individual.

According to Amireh and Majaj, Third World women and their literary production have started to gain more space in the First World context, though in a way that squeezes them into presupposed locations and conditions regarding their subjectivities and their histories. Western discourse continues to categorize and stereotype them. This is due to the unbalanced politics of publication in the West, which selects the texts and narratives representing the Arab female



experience and makes them accessible to the Western audience via translation and publication; this continues to feed the stereotypical representation of Arab Muslim women, leaving it unchallenged. Thus, the reception of these women and the reading of their writings in the Western context most likely further reinforce the preconceived constructed image of the Arab woman (Amireh and Majaj 3). Amireh and Majaj suggest that unless Third World women and their texts are “historicized” when journeying to the Western context, they will continue to be received and read within a hegemonic discourse that is constructed and imposed by Western representations of the Arab woman constructed hegemonic imposed discourse that continues to stereotype them. It is vital that readers in the First World who are reading texts by and about women in the Third World stay alert so that the traveling of these texts from one context to the other is not affected by reception context and politics, “where their meanings [are] reproduced and reshaped to fit local agenda” (3).

Samman, Soueif, and Aboulela, and the texts under study in this dissertation, all travel from their own contexts to the Western context, where they participate in the reception politics that governs the works of Third World women who travel to the First World. These texts demonstrate a range of assumptions and images about the Arab Muslim woman, including that of the victim of socio-political, patriarchal, and cultural repression, in addition to an empowering image that presents them as powerful, active agents of change that challenge expectations within their own cultures and in the Western context. These writers find themselves in a position where they are obliged to confront this imposed politics of reception by targeting it directly through acting upon their own politics of location, where they engage the cultural specificities and contexts in which their female protagonists emerge. They also offer in their representations narratives about empowered women who have long been obscured or under-represented inside

and outside their own respective cultures. Instead of constructing texts and female protagonists who claim to be authentic representations of the Arab woman experience and subjectivities, or ones who are predictable by a Western audience, these writers insist repeatedly that the experiences and subjectivities of Arab women are heterogeneous and cannot be squeezed into a one-dimensional paradigm.

The following study proposes that while Arab women have been represented in literary text, they have been reinscribed in stereotypical “pregiven locations” that set boundaries and limitations to such representations by authors and texts (Mohanty qtd. in Amireh 2). Also, this representation of the Arab female experience remains inadequate, since the construction of their subjectivity and their literary texts have been “dehistoricized” and “decontextualized” (2). The trope of female mobility, journey, and travel utilized by the three authors in this study offers a new narrative technique and strategy that contextualizes the construction and representation of the Arab woman’s varied experiences, identities, and agency.

Thus, to read the trope of mobility and travel in Arab women’s narratives as the site of challenge, deconstruction, transformation, and reconstruction of identity is to offer a new understanding of Arab female agency. Specifically, the employment of tropes of movement and travel as a novel narrative strategy by Samman, Soueif, and Aboulela is to offer instrumental means of challenging the limitations of reception politics, where the persona/protagonists and texts take on an agency of their own, traveling within their own cultural boundaries and crossing them to the West, while allowing their heterogeneous subjectivities to emerge and constantly evolve.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Leaving the Threshold: Departure, Escape and a Women's Place in Ghada Samman's *Beirut 75* and *The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase*

#### Introduction

Ghada Samman's protagonist in *Beirut 75*, Yasmeena, embarks on a journey from Damascus to Beirut in pursuit of social, economic, emotional, and sexual liberation. As she departs from Syria and leaves Damascus en route to Beirut, she enjoys a sense of relief, escaping further from the social and economic oppressive city of her upbringing to a supposedly liberating one. During her journey, Yasmeena is introduced to love, sex, and riches, pleasures that allow her to negotiate her newly acquired luxurious life and its effect on her sexual identity. Although this sexual enjoyment does offer Yasmeena an aspect of liberation, it ultimately leaves her emotionally unfulfilled when she is rejected by the man she falls in love with. Also, her affair leads to her tragic end, as her brother, who was aware of and accepted the affair as long as she provided him with money, kills her, claiming to cleanse his family honor. Nevertheless, the sexual and economic fulfillment Yasmeena enjoys for a brief moment provides her with a profound, if short-lived, awareness of her subjectivity as an independent woman. The mere challenging of elements in her life that suppress her individuality and sexuality through mobility and travel is an initial step to recognizing the limitations imposed upon females due to their sexual and economic limitations. I argue that the sexual suppression Yasmeena experiences in Damascus is a direct result of the social class, economic conditions and poverty of her family, a curse that continues to haunt her even in Beirut, where she is murdered by her brother upon failing to provide him with money. The primary reason for Yasmeena's emotional and sexual suppression prior to and after the journey she undertakes from Damascus to Beirut continues to

persist in her life due to the limited economic conditions that continue to plague her life even in Beirut, leading to her ultimate demise.

### **Contextualizing *Beirut 75*: Venturing Out Beyond Societal Expectations**

*Beirut 75* is a narrative that focuses on the lives of Yasmeena, Farah, and three other male characters, who at the beginning of the novel all board the same cab from Damascus en route to Beirut. Each departs to find elements missing in life back in Damascus, a successful career, fame, riches, safety, and social and sexual freedom. The first half of the narrative is divided nearly equally, each chapter following the life and inner thoughts of one of the five characters, revealing the attractions Beirut offers them. Men's and women's experiences are explored almost equally:

It bears noting that in keeping with Samman's understanding of the feminist message as a call for comprehensive societal transformation, both men and women are depicted in *Beirut 75* as being victimized by forces either partially or completely beyond their control, including political corruption, class discrimination, economic exploitation, destruction of the natural environment, and oppression. (Roberts vi)

Samman in this narrative links the fate of her characters thematically; the feminist message is not specifically emphasized at the expense of the other social themes explored in the work. The common theme that brings the fate of her characters together is that of destruction: all five characters escape Damascus for the supposedly more liberating Beirut; unfortunately the city which is on the verge of social, economic, and political collapse will only offer them destruction. While I will be referring in this chapter to the experiences the other characters in the novel go through in Beirut, mainly the central male character, Farah, I specifically will emphasize the gendered journey Yasmeena embarks on. On the one hand, Yasmeena's experience is interesting because the social decadence and economic collapse that characterize Beirut at the time are what actually provide her the space to exercise her individuality and sexuality more freely. On the

other hand, the decadence and economic collapse of the city unleashes the violence and tragedy that takes place at the end of the novel. This violence leaves Yasmeena, and even Farah, victims of the economic and social collapse that actually will re-empower the patriarchal structure and social restrictions that will continue to impact women's lives in Lebanon during that time.

Just like other Arab woman, specifically Lebanese writers of the 1970s, such as, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Layla Baalbaki, Etel Adnan, Huda Barakat, Samman wrote on gender issues which reflect a "greater awareness of and commitment to the political, social, and sexual issues facing Arab women" (Accad 98). These writings demonstrated a commitment to issues related to the economic power structures, class discrimination, social limitations, and feminist concerns. Accad divides writings by modern and contemporary Arab woman writers into four categories, which developed in four chronological stages, starting from the mid-1940s onwards. These writings generally display the different phases of feminist consciousness and social commitment in the Arab world:

The first section deals with the North African women writers from the mid '40s to the mid '50's, and the problems of biculturality and the search for identity. The second explores the relationship between romanticism, traditionalism and rebellion in Arab women writers from the mid '50s to the mid '60s. The third examines trends toward a more universalized, socially conscious political commitment in the works of Arab women writers published between the mid '60s and the mid '70s. The fourth section assesses the more recent feminist writings by Arab women writers from the mid '70s to the present. (97)

Accad's research asserts that Arab woman writers starting from the mid-1940s addressed feminist issues as they directly relate to their own historical, cultural, and social contexts, specifying the experience of the North African women writers. Even though there are specifics of concern to these writers that relate directly to the experience of being women in their own countries, the evolution of the feminist issues and their relation to the social context that they

have addressed have been closely related, as the majority of their countries went through periods of colonization, postcolonization, liberation from foreign intervention and rule (both politically and culturally), and nationalization. In the second phase Accad specifies, Arab woman writers of the 1950's addressed existential problems of establishing a selfhood freed from the anxiety of patriarchy. In this case, woman writers were concerned with issues pertaining to the search for a cohesive, autonomous self and individuality, and those of this period were concerned basically with portraying "their female characters' private struggles for personal identity, seen alternatively as a search for personhood or as an escape from 'thinghood'" (96). Writers who wrote during this time period include Syrian writer, Colette Khuri, and Lebanese writer Layla Ba'albaki. Khuri's first acclaimed novel published in 1959, *Ayyam Ma'ah (Days With Him)* addresses the struggles of the protagonist, Reem, who goes through a series of what is seen as revolutionary feminist acts during her time period, pursues her education, gets a career at a governmental department, and decides to engage in a romantic relationship with, Ziyad, the man she loves, despite the disapproval of her uncle. However, when Ziyad asks her to leave her career for marriage, Reem refuses, reclaiming an agency that establishes her as an independent woman (Altoma 79). Likewise, Ba'albaki's 1958 novel, *Ana Ahya (I Am Alive)*, focuses on the plight and frustrations of the protagonist, Lina, whom tries to establish herself as a financially independent woman while balancing her desires to be socially independent from her family (Badran and cooke xxxi). Both novels are examples on the early engagement of Arab women writers in social critique and the struggle for financial independence of the Arab woman.

This type of writing by Arab women writers is quite different from the writings of many of their contemporary male counterparts; there is slightly similar emphasis on a selfhood not connected to any "foreign" entity, yet many Arab male writers tend to depict a sustainable

patriarchal social structure. Hafez asserts that from the mid-1950s until the early 1960s, the time Accad emphasizes, male writers depicted selfhood as intrinsically patriarchal, clinging to upholding a traditional and national ethos of the male authority. Also, female characters in such narratives written by men were portrayed as beautiful girls who uphold tradition, patriarchy, and male authority, a portrayal that quite reflected dominant discourses of the nation at the period of time (94). According to Hafez, Arab male writers of this time period did not display any particular sensitivity toward feminist concerns, since they were mostly concerned with establishing a national self, which they saw as an important step toward achieving total autonomy from any foreign “other” (93).

Generally, female characters in the male writings of this period filled the role of “daughter, wife, and mother, and [were] successfully subservient to their fathers, husbands, and sons” (96). In women’s literature of this time period, women characters tended to be committed to resistance against patriarchy, yet they connected a sense of social and political commitment toward a feminist cause to a wider political context. The majority of Arab countries in the late 1960’s became involved in a pan-Arab struggle supporting the Palestinian struggle against Israel, where women were in the forefront, fighting side-by-side with men in order to weaken the foreign domination and be part of their country’s national identity. At this time, women writers, including Samman in her early writings, started displaying a commitment to the feminist cause, yet they would merge it with the wider commitment to the nation. For example, Egyptian writer, Latifa al-Zayyat, demonstrates this mode of writing in her 1960 novel, *The Open Door*. The novel’s protagonist, Layla, has a growing political awareness and engagement which is linked to her incipient feminism. In the novel, Al-Zayyat connects nationalism and feminism, proposing a type of literature with political commitment and feminist aspirations (Amireh 1).

Accad then describes the mid-1970s as a third stage of women's writing, where even though women were committed to a wider political, national, and social struggle alongside their commitment to a feminist cause, they became "disillusioned" "with the realization that political movements used women, instead of working for their liberation" (Accad 96). Also, Jabouri and Ashour argue that Arabic literature produced by women in the 1970s entered an "age of doubt," wherein Arab women novelists wrote about "war, frustration, the erosion of all perceptions and a reality even stranger than fiction" (9). Women of this time wrote about unsolved feminist problems and connected them to a wider political and social structure that was on the verge of plunging into political and sectarian divisions that were to cause great destruction in some countries, especially Lebanon. Among Lebanese women writers of this period are those whom wrote prior to and after the ensuing of the civil war, such as, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Etel Adnan, and Ghada Samman. The thematic concerns of these writers shifted from being feminist oriented toward portraying the civil war through the female experience. This group of women writers called "Beirut Decentrists" is writers who "have shared Beirut as their home and the war as their experience" (Cooke 3). The importance of this type of writing is that women writers articulate the complex experience of war through a female voice, inscribing a unique feminist position.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Samman wrote *Beirut 75* during the first half of the 1970s, the time, according to Accad, when woman writers were frustrated and disillusioned by the neglect of the feminist cause, while prioritizing political conflict and struggle. However, Samman, who by this time period had been championing women's social, sexual, and economic liberation for a decade, strongly connected these freedoms with a wider Arab cause; that is the liberation of men and women in Arab countries from economic and political suppression that plagued Arab societies collectively (Nabulsi 59). It is important to note that while Samman's central female protagonist, Yasmeena,



does display this general mode of feminist frustration and defeat throughout the novel, this condition is mainly connected to her inability to liberate herself from poverty and financial struggle that continue to plague her life even in Beirut. She escapes “thinghood” by being under the guardianship of her mother and the convent she works at as a teacher, not only because she seeks sexual and emotional liberation, but rather because she connects her thinghood to economic dependency. Once in Beirut, she exercises her newly acquired individual freedom with a sense of rebellion, specifically against the years of sexual suppression she had experienced earlier in her life, and a sense of financial gain, since she starts making money through her sexual freedom. Her relationship with Nimr, a wealthy Lebanese businessman, brings her sexual fulfillment for the first time in her life, as well as riches, as Nimr showers her with money and expensive gifts she had never dreamt of acquiring while in Damascus. In return for accepting her relationship with Nimr, Yasmineena’s brother also gains financially, since he demands a constant flow of money from her in return to “granting” her some individual freedom. In the novel, Yasmineena’s sexual suppression and liberation are directly linked to her economic situation, where she departs from Damascus to Beirut in hopes of changing her economic reality, and in retrospect, gaining sexual liberation.

Samman, an advocate of a sexual revolution, continues to present it within its Arab cultural context, where she believes that revolutions against injustices on all fronts in Arab countries are interconnected. In an interview, Samman describes how the sexual revolution is related to different kinds of revolutions taking place in Arab societies, including a political and economic revolution:

It is not a secret that I have come to believe that the sexual revolution is an inseparable part of the Arab individual’s revolution to snatch the rest of his freedoms [...] economical, political and the freedom of speech of writing and thinking. There is no other salvation

save the struggle against all our various concepts including our sexual concepts and the struggle against the superficial bourgeois concept of freedom. (Samman qtd. in El-Hage 1)

Samman here defends social, political, and economic causes for women in Arab society, which will ultimately lead to sexual liberation, issues she connects together in her writings. Also, Samman connects her work to a context yet larger than the Arab one by addressing universal existential issues that reflect the human condition:

The concerns laid bare in *Beirut 75* are not unique to the experience of modern Arabs, but in one degree or another are reflective of the “human condition” common to present-day societies throughout the world as they are forced to rethink previously unquestioned values and practices and as they search of ways of establishing communal identities which affirm the dignity of all individuals.” (Roberts vii)

While my analysis in the following section is specific to the tragic experience of Yasmeeena, and how Samman connects this specific experience to the fate of the rest of the characters and even the lives of the Lebanese people at large, the existential dilemma represented is one that reflects a general universal human condition at the time. Also, even though my focus will be on gender issues raised in the novel, Samman has addressed them “to an extent that they impinge on the condition of society as a whole” (Roberts vii). Thus, throughout my analysis, I will continue to contextualize Yasmeeena’s journey within the temporal and spatial period in which she was represented, where it is necessary to integrate the individual struggle for independency with the wider social context. Specifically, the 1970s was when Arab woman writers, Samman being one of the most prominent of the time, connected women’s issues, and particularly their female characters’ struggles for personal identity, to the social, political, and economic conditions in their societies (Accad 96).

### ***Beirut 75: A Shared Destination and Destiny***

In *Beirut 75*, Samman experiments with narrative voice, techniques, and tropes in a way that makes the journey Yasmineena, Farah, and the other characters make in the cab reflect the journey and dreams that end in nightmares once these characters settle in Beirut. The narrative is told mainly in the third person and shifts sometimes to the first person, where we have direct access to the exact thoughts running in the heads of the characters, especially Yasmineena and Farah. This shift also makes it possible to blend the past, present, and future of the lives of the characters; through flashbacks and interior monologues we learn the utmost about them, such as their past failures in Damascus, their present hopes, and the future they anticipate in Beirut, supposedly, the land of opportunity. Also, this blending of the past, present, and future reflects a general sense of the interconnectedness of past and present times and how they continue to affect each other in the lives of the characters in the narrative. Furthermore, *Beirut 75* has twenty-six chapters, the last twelve of which are nightmares told in the first person by Farah, who at the end is the only survivor of the five main characters. Through these nightmares we learn about the unfortunate destiny of each of the five characters, in addition to that of Yasmineena, and how her dreams of social and economic liberty never see the light.

The controlling trope in the narrative is the journey all five main characters take from Damascus to Beirut on board a cab. This shared journey trope at the beginning of the novel offers a microcosm of a slice of society, where all the characters on board are part of the lower-middle class, or even the lower class, of Damascene society. They all depart to Beirut in hopes of a better life. Even though the characters are not directly related to one another, this shared journey trope connects them to a shared destination and destiny that renders each and every one of them a victim of the decadence, political, and economic collapse Beirut will be experiencing upon their arrival. This concept of journey in the cab Samman employs as a narrative strategy is

meant to transcend the boundaries of the known. Damascus is known, for those boarding the cab, who move toward the unknown, an unfamiliar setting despite what each character imagines Beirut to be. The cab in this journey narrative epitomizes movement and mobility, yet in the negative sense since the journey is fraught with menacing incidents, foreshadowed by three veiled women dressed in black occupying the back seat of the cab and beginning with a flat tire, which in turn foreshadows the destruction of the protagonists in Beirut.

### **Departures and Imagined Arrivals: From Damascus to Beirut**

The novel opens in Damascus, as a cab driver stands under the blazing sun trying to recruit travelers to board his cab bound to Beirut. The description of the Damascene street on that particular day seems harsh:

The sun blazed fiercely and everything on the Damascus street seemed to pant and perspire. Even the buildings and sidewalks seemed to tremble feverishly, shuddering amidst the hot vapors which rose steadily from everything in sight. The sounds of the city too seemed sunscorched, suffocating. (Samman 3)

From the start, this imagery of a cruel city foreshadows the central trope that controls the narrative of the novel: Damascus is not an inviting place to live in; rather, it is a place one suffocates in. In order to survive, one should escape it. The destination is directly stated by the cab driver: “‘Beirut! Beirut!’ he sang out the name as if he were introducing a dancer to the audience at a cabaret” (3). This conflict between the cruel imagery of Damascus and the singing voice of the cab driver presents the central paradox controlling the mind of the main characters in the novel: the oppressive nature of Damascus and the liberal nature of Beirut. Through the tone connected to the mention of both places, it seems that Samman is legitimizing the need to escape which the passengers leaving Damascus feel.

In addition, we are introduced to Farah and Yasmeena, the two protagonists, who cannot wait to depart from Damascus to Beirut once and for all. Farah, whose body “shudders at the name Beirut” and who “can hardly wait a minute longer” to depart from Damascus, is very excited to see Yasmeena, a possible passenger approaching:

An attractive young woman then approached, being seen off by her mother. The latter was veiled, her neediness betrayed by the clothes she wore. Her daughter wore a short dress which revealed a pair of exceedingly fair plump legs. Good, another passenger thought Farah to himself. Three more and we're off to “Beirut,” as if it were the body of a naked woman brushing up against him. (3)

In this scene, the contrast between the mother's and daughter's attires is a focal point Samman purposefully emphasizes to stress the difference between Damascus and Beirut. The mother is dressed in a veil, a significant garment that could reflect many aspects of one's subjectivity, among them religiosity, traditionalism, social and economic class. In contrast, Yasmeena is wearing a short dress that contrasts with the modesty, religion, and/or tradition the mother's dress implies. Also, the mother, who is part of an older generation, veiled and modestly dressed, remaining in Damascus, and the daughter, part of a younger generation, dressed in revealing attire, leaving to Beirut, reflect the stark contrast of what the two places represent and offer to both characters. As he examines Yasmeena's dress and wonders why she could be possibly escaping Damascus to Beirut, Farah remarks, “Perhaps she shops for all her clothes from Beirut like most of the bourgeois women of Damascus do. On the other hand, her mother looked quite poor. Who knows? She might be on a search for glory, like me” (6). Farah's observation also reflects in a sense that Beirut, at the time, was seen not only as a place for independence, freedom, and liberation, but also as a hub for the latest fashion, where upper middle class and upper class Damascene ladies shopped. Most importantly, for Farah to bring up economics and social class when trying to define Yasmeena is focal, because we will learn upon the unfolding of

the narrative that she is actually escaping economic entrapment in Damascus in hopes of achieving economic freedom in Beirut.

Yasmeena considers Damascus not only a traditional restrictive environment that she is “all the more eager to get away” from (4) In some ways, Damascus also represents familial authority from which she wants to detach herself. As her mother sees her off with teary eyes, Yasmeena cannot wait to get away: “Her mother’s teary-eyed farewell seemed only to have aroused her irritation, and she cast impatient glances at the driver, hoping to prod him to get them on their way” (4). For Yasmeena, Damascus represents confinement in a society that offers her opportunity neither to thrive or succeed, nor to enjoy any type of individual freedom:

She thought to herself, I’m tired of working as a teacher in the convent schools. I’m tired, weary, fed up. [...] The days crawl by, as sluggish as an anesthetized body on an operating room table, while I do nothing but teach, write poetry, and suffer discontent and anxiety. Beirut is waiting for me with all her glitter, with all the possibilities of freedom, love, and fame that she holds out, and the opportunity to publish my poems in her newspapers. My heart feels like a bird hungry to fly. I’ll never look at another nun. Ugh. (12)

This summarizes and highlights the multifaceted constraints that Yasmeena has experienced in Damascus: she defines her lifestyle and experiences in terms of lack, as opposed to the multitude of freedoms she looks forward to in Beirut. The ostensible relationship between Yasmeena and Damascus is one of constricted space and restricted movement: the days pass slowly and heavily, reflecting her inner sense of suspension in time. Damascus, epitomized by living with her mother and working at the convent, is for Yasmeena a cage that limits her freedoms. As we learn throughout the narrative, one of the primary freedoms she seeks to attain is sexual liberty. Thus she must leave for Beirut.

Like Yasmeena, Farah flees Damascus, specifically Douma, a rural province connected to Damascus, in hopes of being liberated from living with his authoritative father and mother. His

life in Douma is defined by lack as well. Even his closet, the only valuable thing he owns back in his family house, has in it “nothing worth being concerned about,” yet he always had been concerned about his family having access to it if he were to forget to lock it when he left the house. His locked closet has been the only possession to provide him with a sense of ownership and privacy, detached from the rest of his family. This lack of ownership Farah has always felt can explain why, as he is boarding the cab, he obsesses over the recommendation letter in his pocket written by his father to his relative, Nishan, who might offer him a job and set him on the path to glory as a singer. Thus, for Farah, this letter becomes the only thing he owns; it serves as an exit visa from Damascus and into Beirut.

Just like Farah and Yasmeena, the other three central characters depart from Damascus to Beirut with a sense of escaping from both oppressive traditions and deprivation. Ta’aan is escaping a family blood feud, and Abu ‘l-Malla and Abu Mustafa are escaping poverty and lack. All three characters hinge their hopes on the idea of a better and peaceful life in Beirut. The mere assumption that Beirut offers salvation to those who escape to it is grounded in the binary way these characters, along with Yasmeena and Farah, view Beirut as opposed to Damascus. Damascus has not offered these characters any sense of fulfillment or any resolution to the problems they have been facing. Thus, Beirut becomes the imagined destination to liberation and freedom from the elements they lack in Damascus.

As the cab is departing Damascus, Yasmeena reads etched on a huge boulder at the entrance of the city the words, “remember me always!” Perhaps the name of that person’s sweetheart was Damascus, thought Yasmeena. But she will forget...” (5). Yasmeena’s interpretation of those words as addressed by a lover to a beloved named Damascus can be read as a psychological reflection of how Yasmeena already is determined to leave Damascus for

good. Implied is that Damascus will forever be defined by Yasmineena and Farah in terms of the lack that stands in the way of them fulfilling their individual grand dreams of freedom and fame. The already-established social order and structure that governs their lifestyle in Damascus and Douma is one that has run deep in their society for generations, and the only means of pursuing their personal dreams is to leave for the city of opportunity, Beirut.

“Travelling, [...], is undertaken to restore something that is lacking; because of this, it often acquires a fetishistic structure” (Curtis and Pajaczkowska, 204). Thus, Beirut becomes fetishized by Yasmineena and Farah as a destination that will fill what they sense they lack in their existence in Damascus.

The idea that Beirut is a destination that offers progress, individual liberty, and freedom was not unique to the time in which Samman wrote. According to Samira Aghacy,

Whether it was created before 1967 or after, the fiction written by women focuses on the city as an actual place and as a symbol. The city speaks of the woman’s private and public life, of her confinement in patriarchal models of experience, and of her struggle to win freedom from such constraints. The city is an arena in which women seek individual freedom [...]. (504)

Lebanese woman writers of the last four decades have represented Beirut as a “symbol of well-being, independence, and freedom from shackles” (507). More specifically, the city has been represented in such literature as a liberating destination for the female protagonists, where they are offered “the opportunity to escape the narrow confines of home, family, and stifling traditions that have relegated them to a corner and associated them with the nostalgic past.” (503). In this light, Beirut is seen as a place “where women attempt to keep the ever-haunting past at bay and reveal a thirst for change and for experience and knowledge that they try to replenish in the city” (503). Beirut becomes an embodiment of all the opportunities and freedoms



these female protagonists seek to obtain. It also becomes a place to achieve liberating experiences that they have missed out on prior to living in or relocating to Beirut.

Samman's characters, both male and female, actually view Beirut in the same vein Aghacy describes. As they are in the cab traveling, the characters think about their personal struggles back in Damascus and how Beirut will liberate them from the lives they have been carrying out.

However, Aghacy notes that even though the city is a place that offers individuality, liberty and freedom, it "incorporates and embraces both the traditional and modern patterns" of society:

The city is a challenging environment because it promises liberation from domestic routines and the freedom to explore oneself in private as well as public forms of experience. Being the domain of anonymity, freedom, nonconformity, and individualism, the city in many texts written by women does not conform to the definition of the past. Nevertheless, living in an urban setting remains problematic, because self-realization is difficult in a world where the past continues to intrude and prevail. (506)

In *Beirut* 75, the characters imagine and dream of reaching a Beirut that will totally liberate them from the older social structures and the past, and deliver them to a life of freedom. Just like any destination one escapes to, Beirut becomes an imaginary construction that offers up the hope and possibility of a better—or at least a different—place in which a new home and identity can be forged (Robertson, Mash, et al. 4).

Is Beirut really a place that will compensate for the lack the characters have experienced in Damascus? It becomes clear that Samman intends to complicate this representation by presenting her characters' imaginings and dreams about Beirut prior to actually experiencing it. Their predictions about Beirut reflect how they actually were only charmed by the idea of

freedom and liberty, as opposed to the oppression they have experienced in the past: they each see a personalized Beirut: “Instead of one Beirut, there were five” (10). However, the city of their destination is in fact a “challenging environment” (506), where their past will not be totally disconnected from either their present or their future.

When the cab starts going further away from Damascus and the actual spatial journey toward Beirut begins, they each become excited, as it seems that their dreams are about to materialize. Once Yasmeeena gains sight of the outskirts of Beirut for the first time, she feels that her dreams of freedom are coming true; she imagines herself becoming “free as a butterfly” in Beirut (10).

Farah also, glancing toward the city before reaching it, becomes “enchanted” by the lights on the peaks of its hills. It is very important to note that the choice of “enchanted” hints that Farah’s excitement could be the result of his being deceived (10). Beirut, as a city, has not promised to give them what these characters lacked in Damascus; however, it becomes a fetish that embodies all that Damascus lacks in their imagination. Not only that, the mere traveling from Damascus to Beirut becomes “a fetishizing activity, journeying as disavowal of ... the present [...]” (Pollock 72). Yasmeeena and Farah are fixated on the idea that traveling to Beirut will provide them with what their present in Damascus has not. Whether deliberately or not, the sense of escape these characters display deceives them into being charmed by a destination that is, perhaps, inviting, yet has not proven itself able to fulfill their expectations.

It is the illusion of a liberating Beirut that drives Yasmeeena and Farah to choose it as their destination, while not being able to predict that Beirut, despite the liberating experiences it will

offer them, is a place that will prove to be a prison for them and the other characters who move to it.

[...] Beirut. The name alone causes these poor unknowns to shiver with excitement at the promise of freedom and secular pleasures. But these pleasures, Samman graphically illustrates, are false lures in a city which has adopted only the trappings of modernization, but which is still riven by blood feuds, class exploitation, and an unyielding patriarchy. (1)

Thus, from the beginning of the journey, the disparity between the illusions of Beirut, already constructed in Yasmeena's and Farah's heads, and the real Beirut that they both have yet to experience, is one highlighted during the cab journey in several scenes where the destructive element of the city of their destination is foreshadowed. One of the first foreshadowings is when three women dressed and veiled in black take the back seat of the cab, sobbing and weeping. Yasmeena, who has been preoccupied with her hopeful dreams of reaching liberating Beirut, thinks perhaps "some relative of theirs has died in Beirut, and they're going to his funeral" (Samman 5). Farah, on the other hand, who has become pensive and worried about how his life will unfold in Beirut thinks, "Why do they sob so? Do you suppose I'm headed to my death, while these are the soothsayers of fate lamenting my departure as they escort me to my grave?" (5). This symbolic scene seems to predict the impending doom that will hover around every action Yasmeena and Farah undertake during their time in Beirut.

Another foreshadowing is when the cab is nearing Beirut and the festal fires of the Feast of the Cross appear in the passengers' view from behind the mountain tops. Yasmeena and Farah react differently to the scene:

Farah thought suddenly, it's as if I were attending a festival in which a human sacrifice were about to be offered to some evil deity. And who shall it be? –me? Yasmeena said in delight, "It's the Feast of the Cross! How beautiful it all is!" (8)

It seems that Yasmeena's determination to reach the destination of her dreams charms her into interpreting any incident that takes place on the way as a sign of blessing for her imagined grand entrance. Farah, though excited about the abundance of opportunity Beirut can offer him, starts fearing the unknown destiny awaiting him. This overwhelming feeling pushes him toward interpreting the disruptive incidents during the journey as warning signs of an impending doom. Farah, who proves over and over again throughout the novel that he has a realistic outlook toward the journey he embarks on, realizes that moving to a new city, even though liberating, can also end in failure. This fear continues to make him more pensive about the hidden future than Yasmeena, who continues to see the future only as a liberating experience yet to unfold. Displaying a somewhat naïve outlook toward the future and an immature infatuation with Beirut. She never contemplates the possibility of failure in this city of opportunity.

Furthermore, it is not until Farah and Yasmeena first set eye on the city that Farah notices an image that quintessentially symbolizes the kind of life awaiting him and the other travelers in Beirut:

In the bright city lights Farah could see their wondrous wares: in nylon sacks filled with water there swam tiny colored fish which, when the bags were hung high, looked as though they were swimming in the translucent light. (11)

In this scene, Samman intends to provide an insight into the conditions that will become the reality of Yasmeena's and Farah's lives upon their relocation. The trappings of the city will seduce the characters at first by its fluidity and transparency, yet will trap them and isolate them from realizing their dreams. Even though Farah admires the sight, it seems that subconsciously it makes him realize that he will meet his doom at this destination, as will the others. He repeats

“Dante’s words inscribed on the gate leading into hell, ‘All ye who enter here, abandon all hope!’” (11).

This short time, in which Farah’s attitude toward Beirut switches from hopeful to pessimistic, reflects Samman’s embedded views on Beirut, both as a city of redemption and of entrapment. This double description of the city is part of the reality of Beirut and its representation in the literature of the time period. Beirut was portrayed as an ambivalent city of liberation and progress, yet a place where the past continues to disrupt and prevail in the present and future. Writing about Beirut in 1974 specifically, a year prior to the eruption of the civil war, Samman’s novel as a whole foreshadows the destruction and chaos that took place the following year. Samman is aware that, superficially, Beirut was viewed as a liberating destination that offered a multitude of opportunities for both male and females, especially those coming from Damascus, a city much more traditional and conservative during the 1970s. Despite this, just like any other modern city, and specifically a city on the verge of a civil war, Beirut’s socio-political disruption made of the city an unsettling site, where the boundaries between the older order, represented by tradition and patriarchal authority, and the new order, represented by progress and individual liberty, continued to interfuse. Even though *Beirut 75* presents the Beirut of 1974 as a destructive place, at least Samman gets to unmask “the pretensions of the ruling class and the ruling gender which she holds responsible for its misery” (Jensen 1). I agree with this assertion because it seems that Samman created characters in the specific moment of existential crisis Beirut was going through, when the socio-political reality was just arching toward a catastrophic destiny for the city and those living in it.

Furthermore, Yasmeena is deceived, as she does not predict that the liberating city of her imagination actually will meet her with the very same oppressive past she escaped from in

Damascus. All that she looks forward to is a life of economic independence, and sexual and emotional freedom. She also looks forward to becoming the published poet she longs to become. However, Samman creates her characters, and especially Yasmineena, within a world of impending doom that evokes the social and political reality of Beirut and the Lebanese society at large during that time.

Despite women's endeavors to conceive the self as an independent entity and to realize themselves in the city, the pernicious influence of the past can frustrate attempts to achieve autonomy and freedom. In this context, one could say that the strong impact of the past on literature before 1975 is more devastating and incapacitating than in the fiction that appeared after this date. (Aghacy 511)

Yasmineena takes for granted that Beirut is the place of liberation; she is unaware of the socio-economic and political issues that Beirut suffers and that will affect her life as she relocates. It seems that Samman, like other woman authors of her time period, was aware of the trappings of Beirut and attempted to convey these elements of social collapse through Yasmineena, Farah, and the rest of the characters' experiences in the "fallen city" of Beirut (al-Hage 1). In the narrative of *Beirut 75*, Samman registers the fear and anxiety she felt about a Beirut turning out to be a restrictive rather than liberating space for both her female and male characters during the time in which she wrote.

### **Arriving Without Arrivals: Beirut—Where the Journey Begins and Ends**

Right after arriving in Beirut for the first time, Yasmineena is introduced to her emotional and sexual subjectivity. Beirut becomes a place of "redemption and a space to be made over" when Yasmineena thinks she can launch her career as a successful teacher and a published poet (Robertson, Mash, et al. 3). Beirut does actually offer her the freedom she seek.

Until she departs Damascus for Beirut, Yasmeena has experienced no sexually fulfilling experience. Conversely, she views her body as a site of shame that should be covered, even in the presence of nobody but her own self: Sunbathing nude on a yacht off the coast of Beirut, Yasmeena thinks, “This is the first time I’ve ever gotten completely undressed anywhere but in the bathroom. And when I put my clothes back on, I was always safely hidden by the thick steam and the dim light” (12). Yasmeena’s reservation over her body while in Damascus had been influenced by the conservative societal attitudes she had been brought up with. Despite these social restrictions, she does engage in sexual experimentation: she meets a man in his apartment, where they “closed all the windows, drew all the curtains, turned out all the lights, and locked all the doors” (12). However, even this confined, locked space did not put off Yasmeena’s fear, of being discovered by her mother specifically.

Even then I could hear voices oozing out of the darkness and bouncing off the walls, warning of the “iniquity” which was about to take place. Mingling with the cries of my mother, the voice seemed to be coming out of my own body, as if I were possessed by them. Their words were like scorpions covering my body, stinging me mercilessly. Their injunctions were like maggots scurrying over me in the darkness, consuming my body and extinguishing my passions. When he touched me, the voices rang out in a chorus of alarm. Perhaps he heard them, too. He was unable to possess me, and I fled from his house. I never saw him again, nor did I repeat the experience. (12)

Yasmeena’s fear of the brutal negativity she would have received from her mother and her social circle, and the guilt it produced, had restricted her from freely acting upon her sexuality in Damascus, as symbolized by the imagery of her body being stung mercilessly by scorpions. As long as she were in Damascus, she would never be able to free herself from the negative voices of her mother toward her sexuality. Thus it had become imperative that she depart from Damascus.

Once in Beirut, “[t]he snows of her twenty-seven years were melting at last, the snow which had descended upon her during her ten long years of nuns’ habits and teaching in the convent school” (13). In her twenty-seven years in Damascus, her emotions and sexuality had been frozen, but she experiences her sexuality freely for the first time in Beirut, totally free from any familial judgment and attitudes that might cause her the anxiety, fear, and guilt she experienced in Damascus.

Not only does she move away from the boundaries imposed by society, she is able to transcend any sense of guilt.

Her body was awakened by the sun, by his touch, by the lapping of the waves, the scent of salt, the swaying of the yacht on the surface of the water, and the effects of the whiskey which she’d never tasted before now. The endless blue sky seemed to overflow with tranquility and goodwill, as if it were granting its blessings to the moments in which she had first discovered her body, and the sun. What a thrilling, wild feeling had come over her when, for the first time in her life, she lay naked beneath the sun’s rays. (12)

“Abroad is often conceived as a place where simple self-gratification is not only possible but also constituted as a way of life” (204). Beirut allows Yasmeena to enjoy the endless sensual pleasures of her bodily freedom. Not only that, Nimr’s body stirs Yasmeena’s eroticism in ways she has never experienced before. While gratifying herself sensually and sexually with Nimr, Yasmeena “liked to think of them as reliving the original creation myth” (Samman 13). It is in this environment of excessive pleasure that Yasmeena determines the way of life she wants to carry out in Beirut forever, shaping her sexual subjectivity by the leisure and freedom that accompanies it.

The yacht, where Yasmeena experiences bodily sensuality and sexuality, is situated in Lebanon, thus further reinforcing that traveling away from Damascus provides her with a life of



gratification and leisure. She becomes aware that without indulging the joys of her body, she would remain ignorant of what gives her life meaning. She discovers that fulfilling her sexual desires is a step toward her realization of a new self to replace the one defined for so long by lack.

She could no longer imagine how she'd allowed her body to move about like an automaton all these years without ever coming to see what a wonder it was. She'd only had short-lived, passing adventures in which her body had refused to fully participate. How could she have carried her body about all those years as a burden, a corpse, a mere means of transportation, or a tool to carry chalk with? Now she was discovering it for the first time as a world unto itself, full of delight and pleasures. If she hadn't come to Beirut, she would have remained ignorant all her life of how she was really capable of functioning, how she could tremble with desire and dance madly to the rhythm of a man's caress. (13)

After being introduced to the sexual delights and pleasures she lacked for so long in her life, Yasmeena realizes that such pleasures are what give her a zest for life that she never felt while in Damascus. However, this sexual experimentation becomes fetishizing, and she starts viewing her sexuality and sexual pleasures as the only dimension that defines her newly acquired subjectivity and freedom. "She was still sipping whiskey and roaming naked over the deck of the yacht. She enjoyed taking off her clothes and moving about the cabin and the rest of the boat in a state of nakedness. It filled her with a delicious sense of freedom" (38). She realizes the power of reclaiming her sexuality, which is the equivalent of freedom, self-realization, and understanding what defines her, and thus claiming a self. Prior to enjoying a full, healthy sexual experience Yasmeena views herself as a "corpse," whereas after enjoying the pleasures of the body she understands how "she is capable of functioning" (14). Having made a fetish of her sexuality, she begins to define completeness and wholeness in terms of that sexuality. Yasmeena thus depends on sex and becomes fixated on it as a means to recover both agency and subjectivity.

After enjoying the pleasures of her body and sexuality, Yasmeena resolves that the only way to reclaim her body from the sexual deprivation for years is to plunge herself further into this newly acquired delight. Her sexual experience liberates her from the limitations that had confined her body for so long, and she fully immerses herself in Nimr's body, to which she is addicted:

But ah, what his body could do to her! His body perfumed with expensive suntan oil and with the softness of a life of ease and luxury. She thought, nothing in the world can compare with the intoxicating sweetness of being joined to a beloved man, beneath the sun, in broad daylight, on the high seas where no sound can be heard but that of the lapping of the waves. At such moments her heart was transformed from a monotonously ticking clock into a drum being beaten with wild abandon as naked dancers twirled madly about in a tropical rain forest. (14)

In this scene, Yasmeena responds to the pleasures Nimr's body offers her in a way that could be interpreted as not only an attempt to reclaim agency and sexual subjectivity, but an attempt to objectify the male body for her mere pleasure. In this way, Yasmeena comes, perhaps momentarily, to a position of power, where she actively sees Nimr as her sex object. However, when Yasmeena objectifies Nimr's body, her purpose is not to exercise any type of power over him but rather satisfy her sexual hunger and undo her deprivation: "I love what his naked body can do to me. [...] I've become an addict, and his body is my opium" (39). This sense of addiction to Nimr's body signals how such a fixation is a signal of weakness rather than a means of empowerment.

In addition, sexual delight and pleasure for Yasmeena are not separable from economic luxury and freedom. In Damascus Yasmeena had been deprived of a luxurious life due to her social class, just as she had been deprived of the pleasures of her sexuality. Nimr's socio-economic status becomes as attractive to her as his body; both offer her the same level of

satisfaction. “She loved his wealth as much as she despised her poverty. She loved the brashness and insolence with which his miraculously constituted frame broadcast his privileged status in the world. [...] ‘He was born with a checkbook in his mouth. I was born with an overdue bill in mine’” (14). As we will learn later, Nimr’s riches and social status become a precondition for her continued exercise of her freedom because they both offer her free mobility in the city, independent of patriarchal authority, represented by her brother, who lives in Beirut.

When Yasmineena moves to Beirut, she carries her brother’s address with her in order to seek him and perhaps live with him for a certain period of time until she acquires a job. However, from the start, she is introduced to Nimr and starts living with him. Her brother, who is supposed to be responsible for supporting her financially until she finds a job as a teacher or a poet, does not object to her having a relationship with Nimr, as Yasmineena regularly visits him and provides him with part of the money Nimr gives her. What is interesting about the brother’s initial response to knowing his sister is Nimr’s mistress is that he does not seem to be affected by the traditional idea that he is a guardian and a protector of his sister’s honor, which traditionally has been defined through controlling his sister’s sexuality. As long as there is financial benefit for him in store, he does not assume the authoritative role. Greed is his basic drive. From this, we learn that Yasmineena’s relationship with Nimr is of double benefit to her, offering both pleasure and freedom from her brother’s control.

A crucial turning point in Yasmineena’s journey toward economic and self satisfaction is when she realizes that fulfilling her sexual desires is not sufficient to enable her to go on feeling like a fully “functioning” being (42). After enjoying sexual fulfillment, she starts experiencing emotional attachment to Nimr, emotional attachment that she recalls never feeling back home in Damascus. Since Beirut has compensated her for her previous lack of sexual pleasure and

provided her with a complete healthy sexual experience, she moves further toward filling her emotional lack with love. However, Nimr does not reciprocate those feelings. He is able to offer her his body and his money, but he is not ready to offer his emotions, since he does not view emotions in the same light she does.

When Nimr neglects Yasmeena emotionally, she looks for other means to fill this void. She realizes that she has made a mistake by neglecting her writing and pretty much everything else she had desired to achieve in Beirut, settling instead for sex and money. She has not acted upon the free space and mobility Beirut offered her, thus committing one of the most atrocious mistakes in her life: arresting her agency. So she decides to go back to writing.

She decided to seek refuge in her papers and write a poem as she'd always done before when she was sad. But she was unable to. She'd even forgot about the desire she once had to meet with literary critics, reporters, and publishers. She'd forgotten everything. Nimr had become her entire universe, the ground beneath her feet, and now he was withdrawing and leaving her to fall alone through space. (43)

However, it is too late for Yasmeena to pull herself out of her emotional fixation on Nimr. His body has become her "opium" and his money the only means of liberation from her brother. As he starts pulling away from her, neglecting her at home and never taking her out to introduce her to his social circle, she starts obsessing more over her attachment to him. Eventually, she conditions her well-being, and pretty much her whole existence, on the presence of Nimr in her life: nothing else seems to matter beyond his presence.

Yasmeena can no longer distinguish between her emotional connection to Nimr and her sexual addiction to his body. The sense of deprivation seems to be what drives her obsessive attitude. This very deprivation is one that Yasmeena, and certainly Samman, connect to the deprivation Arab women suffered for centuries, due to an over-controlling older, traditional, patriarchal authority that governed women's sexuality:

[H]is body... I'd become accustomed to it, addicted to it. [...]. For all of twenty-seven years I'd been forbidden to partake of this amazing pleasure, and here I was now, ill on account of it, a deviant who had devoted herself to bed. In my blood ran the passionate desires of all the Arab women who had been held prisoner for more than a thousand of years. It was no longer possible for me to experience sex as merely one part of my life. Instead, I'd been vanquished in my encounter with it, and it had become my entire existence. (41)

Just like the other Arab women whom she connects herself with, Yasmeena sees that they all have been held prisoners for years, since their sexual freedom was regulated and controlled by authoritarian men in their lives. From this, we come to understand that Samman intends for Yasmeena to represent the sexual and emotional deprivation all Arab women have suffered, and Yasmeena's over-obsession with the male body and the desires it arouses in her should be viewed in that specific context: "It isn't because I'm a whore, but simply because my hunger for his body is more than a thousand years old" (42). Also, on an individual level, Yasmeena starts wondering whether the sexual deprivation she experienced in Damascus is the very reason for her fixation on what she had lacked: "She wondered to herself, if I'd known another man before Nimr—if they had allowed my body to experience wholesome, sound relationships in Damascus—would I have lost my way to this extent?" (95). At this moment of her experience, Yasmeena continues to blame her past for constantly plunging itself forcefully into her present, thus preventing her from evolving into a fully autonomous person, keeping her confined within the social parameters of tradition she was born into: "When the purveyors of tradition confined me within a female's 'proper' role, as a genie is held captive inside its bottle, they forgot that in doing so, they were stripping me of my powers of resistance" (42).

While Yasmeena reconciles her sexual feelings with her emotions toward Nimr, Nimr does not view his relationship with her as going beyond sexual gratification. During Nimr's

monologue, when he reaches the resolution of ending his relationship with Yasmeena, he reflects on his attitude toward love and her:

It is impossible for me, Nimr Faris Sakeeni, to love? Me, love a poor girl who's ignorant of social etiquette, has bad taste in clothes, and gave herself to me physically without our being married? Love, love, love—that's all she understands and talks about. For me, there are sexual relations, in which there's nothing wrong with leading a woman on with the word "love," and then there is a marital relation, in which the most important thing is that the marriage be politically and financially expedient for my father and me. (79)

From the start, Nimr's only involvement with Yasmeena is sexual. Though he showers her with money and gifts, he never looks at her as anything but his mistress. Nimr's final blow to Yasmeena is when he abandons her to marry his father's political rival's daughter. Not only that, the marriage is a traditional arranged one, where Nimr does not know his fiancée personally prior to his father asking him to propose to her. Yasmeena, who still has faith in the new, modern, and liberating social order that governs Beirut, is astonished to learn that "arranged marriages" in the "peculiar city" of Beirut would take place. As Yasmeena becomes disillusioned with Nimr and even the traditional social structure that governs Beirut, she feels abandoned, by both Beirut and Nimr, the two objects she had initially looked to for individual freedom, riches, mobility, and sexual delight.

This double abandonment becomes triple when she returns to her brother's apartment empty handed, with no money from Nimr. Her brother, enraged when he realizes that he will not be receiving that money anymore, thinks Yasmeena is fooling him by profiting off other sexual affairs without sharing the profit with him. However, what matters the most to him is that he will no longer get money from Yasmeena in return for ignoring her affair with Nimr. No longer willing to accept her promiscuity and enraged, he starts beating her up, calling her "slut," and "filthy whore" (95). As he starts undermining her for engaging in an extramarital relationship,

she thinks, “There’s no need to start pretending all of a sudden that you’re interested in defending your lofty honor!” (96). But before she is able to utter those words, her brother attacks her. “But her mouth was full of blood, and before she could say a word, the knife sank into her chest. She didn’t feel anything but astonishment” (96).

Right after the murder, Yasmeeena’s brother surrenders himself at the police station, confessing that he has killed his sister to restore the family honor she has tarnished: “In a manly voice he said, I killed my sister in defense of my honor and I want to make a complete confession” (96). The adverb “manly” was chosen carefully to describe the sense of legitimacy that surrounds honor crimes. Her brother realizes his sense of entitlement over his sister’s sexuality and body, which in a sense is legitimized by a powerful patriarchal social authority. This is emphasized by the reaction he gets from the officer and clerk at the police station who hear his story: “A look of admiration flashed in the officer’s eyes [...]” “The brother then began making his confession while the clerk wrote it down, in his eyes, also, a look of appreciation and respect” (96). The brother’s confession is received with admiration from these men who also believe that a woman defiling her family honor deserves to be put to death by a patriarchal authority figure.

Yasmeeena’s abandonment by Nimr, her brother, and the city of Beirut represent the predominance of patriarchal authority and tradition that leads to violence against women. Though all three things manage for a while to appear to Yasmeeena as liberating factors, their disguise does not endure for long. Nimr, who appears to be the modern, wealthy, open-minded gentleman, uses her for sex then abandons her. Her brother, who allows her mobility, space, and social freedom when it profits him, eventually, kills her. Beirut becomes a curse on Yasmeeena; the city and its social structure fall into a state of regression toward an awakening traditional

patriarchal authority that starts dominating Lebanese society, going through political and economic collapse. Thus, since the sustainability of the liberties Yasmineena gains were granted by a Beirut that is losing its own progress, modernization, liberty, and freedom, it becomes inevitable that Yasmineena loses those very same liberties at the end. Yasmineena's relationship with all three major factors in her life in Lebanon, at the end, turns out to be destructive, as she is finally obliterated for wanting to exercise the very same liberties they offered her, especially economic liberty.

Not only does Yasmineena, the only female protagonist in *Beirut 75*, become a victim of the collapse of the social and economic stability and thus the reviving patriarchal authority in Beirut, Farah's journey is riddled with a similar type of patriarchal authority that overpowers him and leads him to madness at the end due to power manipulation exercised upon him. Before actually experiencing Beirut as a destructive force in his life, Farah has a sense of foreboding as he sets foot in Beirut:

Cruelty—there was an atmosphere of cruelty that he became aware of whenever he tried to make a move in this strange city. He was constantly hearing the echoes of a long drawn-out wail wherever he went. Ever since the night of his arrival, the mysterious sound of mournful weeping had haunted him. It was as if it had taken up residence in his soul and refused to be dislodged.(23)

The state of Beirut that Farah senses as he boards the cab in Damascus continues to haunt him even as he arrives. Despite looking forward to meeting his rich relative Nishan, the ominous sense of destruction presents itself in the city itself, which continues to remind Farah of the possibility of failure.

Just like Yasmineena, Farah escapes to Beirut in hopes of distancing himself from his father's patriarchal grip and in hopes of advancing financially, but little does he know that his



life will fall under total control of a much more authoritarian figure, Nishan, who offers him a contract to become the famous singer he always dreamed of becoming.

My father, the tyrannical peasant, seemed to enjoy toying with my destiny. He would throw the books I was so addicted to into the bonfires that he used to set for burning weeds. He'd bellow at me, "Instead of wasting your life thinking and obsessing, you ought to be like Nishan!" [...]. I'm going to turn you over with my cousin Nishan. He'll pour you into the right mold—a golden one!" I myself love gold and riches. After all, riches mean freedom, time, travel, being able to buy books and records, and not being subservient to Adil, director of the National Library where I used to work. Money means beautiful women with soft hands and long, painted fingernails. (17)

However, this gain comes at a very high price, since Nishan assumes domination over Farah's body and life, believing that giving him the opportunity for fame and success entitles him to such. Nishan, who is not attracted to women sexually, starts treating Farah as his sexual object as the price for offering him an opportunity at fame and riches:

I was lying on my stomach when he began to massage my back for me, causing the aroma of the costly suntan oil to diffuse through the air. At first, his fingers moved gently and delicately back and forth over my skin [...]. But then his touch became rough and violent, like a plow going down into the soil. And then I understood. (69)

While Nishan has marketed Farah to be the "singer of manliness," attracting a female audience with his masculinity, Farah starts feeling emasculated after he is treated like a sex object by Nishan and no longer can have any sort of healthy heterosexual interaction with women: "He felt that the door between him and the world of women had been shut forever" (67).

This objectification plunges Farah into depression, as he feels a total loss of manhood—the manhood he actually left Damascus and Douma to restore: "When Farah heard her address him by his title, 'singer of manliness,' he nearly burst out laughing and crying at the same time. It was with this image that Nishan had launched him to stardom: the 'singer of manliness'" (67). Farah is no longer able to consolidate the public image Nishan has marketed him to be and the emasculated one he has actually made of him, where Farah starts touring the streets of Beirut

dressed in women's clothes. Massad comments on Samman's treatment of homosexuality and its relationship to power abuse and to traditional concepts of masculinity, manliness, and femininity:

For Ghada Al-Samman, the Lebanese ruling class was literally a bunch of fuckers penetrating dreamy-eyed youth, destroying them in the process. If active male homosexuality in al-Samman's novel resulted from [...] wealthy decadence, and passive male homosexuality from ambition to greed, this was because manly masculinity was nothing less than a masquerade, just as femininity has always been. Al-Samman's depiction is one wherein passive homosexual experiences not only render men impotent but also impels them to dress the part, wearing women's clothing and publicly declaring their womanly, and therefore, unmanly, essence. As for those who continue to pose as manly men, her novel sought to remove the veil from them (Nishan, the early Farah, Yasmeena's brother, as well as other male characters) in order to expose their unmanliness. Indeed, the attempt by Nishan to recreate the "epoch of manly men" was doomed to failure precisely because he lived in a world where castration dominated. (321-322)

In the novel, Samman portrays the ruling class prevalent in Lebanese society of the time period as one that subjects those under its authority and power to sexual abuse as a means to expressing authority over those in weaker subject positions. Massad's analysis of the relationship between male homosexuality and power abuse in the novel leads to the conclusion that Samman connects male homosexuality in the novel to economic and social decadence of the ruling class and their power manipulation.<sup>xxiv</sup> Sexual abuse and exploitation here is represented as only another type of injustice and exploitation exercised by those in power positions against those under their authority.

The destructive relationship Farah has with Nishan alienates him further from Beirut and all the goals he wants to achieve. Farah is overcome by a sense of passivity and voicelessness, since he is unable to challenge being exploited. This lack of control over his own body and sexuality leads Farah to excessive drinking, which leads him to hallucinating and finally a nervous breakdown. As a means of escape from his depressing reality, Farah becomes addicted

to prescription drugs, which cause his mental capacity to deteriorate. As a result, Nishan sends Farah to a mental hospital to receive treatment. Farah has a series of nightmares, where it seems that his condition further deteriorates.

However, at the mental hospital Farah makes the decision of running away from Beirut back to Damascus in order to restore his sanity: "I'm going to run away, back into the arms of my Mother Earth. I've got to stay hidden without being afraid of my nightmares. I've got to be careful as I flee because Nishan is determined to get back at me with all the influence of money at his disposal. He wanted me in the insane hospital not to see me healed, but to take revenge on me, to torture me" (114-115). In Farah's view, Nishan, Beirut, and all the people living there are the insane ones, whom he should distance himself from. "He's the one who's ill, though, since he's the one who's able to accommodate himself to this sick society. As for me, I'm healthy. That's why I wasn't able to fall into a state of utter, absolute madness" (115). Believing that he has reached mental clarity, he distances himself from the lures of Beirut that had attracted him while he was in Damascus. He comes to the realization that Beirut is not really the liberating city, but rather an alienating city of madness. His sense of identity and subjectivity is shattered in a city that has disoriented him from his dream and even his inner self:

Ah—the day I came to Beirut, I was vaster than the night, and the sea itself wouldn't have been large enough for my bed. It seemed to me that the entire star-pierced canopy of darkness would be too small to contain my ambition and that all the women of Beirut wouldn't suffice me. [...] God, how broken I am, how scattered! And here I am now, gathering up the pieces of my broken self in a wretched hideout behind a garbage dump. (115)

Farah's lot enables him to fight back while he can, as opposed to that of Yasmeena, whose life is snatched away before she can discover that the lure of Beirut and its people is false, and perhaps

make a decision to return to Damascus. However, the way Yasmineena and Farah experience Beirut is nothing but a reflection of the power and class abuse that takes place in Beirut.

Turning into an escapist once more, Farah realizes that returning to square one will at least provide him with the safety of his previous life. In the closing lines of the novel, Farah shows that he considers flight his only means of survival:

When I ran away from the hospital, the first thing I did was to steal the sign at the entrance that said "Hospital for the Mentally Ill." I took it to the city entrance, removed the sign saying "Beirut," and planted the other one in its place. I burst out laughing as I read the sign saying. "Hospital for the Mentally Ill," with Beirut looming up behind it in dawn's light like an infernal wild beast preparing to pounce. And I ran away, fleeing to the safety of my lair [...]. (115)

When Farah finally leaves and replaces the Beirut sign with the mental hospital sign, it becomes apparent that Samman is representing a city that lacks social order. In this powerful scene, Samman confirms and concludes the earlier imaginative scenes of destruction that overpower Farah as he is boarding the cab from Damascus to Beirut. It is when Farah decides to return to the site of his departure that we as readers also realize that the circular journey he is taking will never end with an arrival at any of the goals and dreams he anticipated achieving by this journey. Just like Yasmineena, Farah is never able to gain any sense of agency to control the route to success either in Beirut or back home. This lack of control over their own lives ultimately leads to an impossibility of arrival at a final destination that affects any positive change in their lives or achieves their dreams. Ultimately, Beirut for Yasmineena and Farah reveals itself to be a place of suppression and oppression, where they both become victims of an empowered patriarchal authority empowered by social decadence and economic exploitation.

Ultimately, the way both the male and female protagonists experience Beirut is similar, as they both experience temporary freedom that comes to an end shortly after their arrival. The

old economic structure, social structure, and patriarchal authority they have escaped from in Damascus come to dominate their lives in Beirut. However, the mere addressing of the suppression of individual liberty and freedom that concerns the lives of both male and female characters in this narrative is a challenge and a revolutionary step toward criticizing the Arab socio-economic and political structures of the time that stripped both females and males alike of their individual freedoms.

### ***The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase: The Centrality of Home While Abroad***

*The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase*<sup>xv</sup> is a travelogue, a collection of travel accounts written by Samman from 1964 to 1976 and published periodically in two Lebanese magazines, *Al-Isbu' al-Arabi* and *Al-Hawadith* (Al Waref 1). The travels Samman undertakes are arranged chronologically by composition date and reflect her succeeding travels from one county or city to another. The period of which she writes begins with her very first trip to Europe in pursuit of an MA, encountering London for the first time, and extends to her visits to various Arab cities, including Amman and Baghdad, and her eventual decision to settle in Beirut. These travels include destinations that she visits for numerous purposes besides the academic, including searching for a job and attempting to find a final destination to settle down in. What characterizes Samman's travelogue is her inability to transcend the dichotomy of home and abroad and East-West, where she presents home and abroad as clearly defined categories, and "self" and "other" as spatially distinct entities despite her claims otherwise. This act of observing the places she visits while setting home as the place of departure renders Samman's travel

experiences subjective. Thus, for Samman, “home is a stable place to tell one’s stories” (Clifford 1).

Initially, after her trip to London in pursuit of an MA, Samman was sentenced to prison for not obtaining permission from the Syrian government to leave the country to Europe<sup>xxvi</sup>, a law where the Syrian government had restricted those with university degrees to leave without a governmental permission. According to El-Hage who has written on Samman’s autobiographical writings:

...another reason for al-Samman’s decision not to return to Syria could have been her problem with the Syrian authorities. She relates that in the summer of 1966, while in London, her father passed away in Damascus. At the same time, she was sentenced to jail for three months because she held a university degree and had left the country without official permission from the authorities. (1)

A couple of months later, the sentence was “revoked under a general pardon by the Syrian government” (Al Waref 1). As a result, Samman was allowed to return to Syria, yet she chose not to even while her passport had expired, rendering her a wandering woman with no country temporarily. It was not long before she managed to obtain a Lebanese passport, gaining citizenship through marriage, yet the sense of rootlessness she felt after losing her Syrian citizenship continued to haunt her throughout her trips.

In this section, I will analyze Samman’s constant sense of alienation from both Arab socio-political ideologies and the European countries she travels to that also misrepresent the Arab persona. The more she traveled around European countries, the more the sense of alienation and estrangement she felt from her own “self” and the “others” she encountered grew. Analyzing several of her trip narratives, especially those she relates about the trips she undertakes to a couple of European countries, I argue that she constructs a self that is disillusioned by both the

Arab and the Western/European world; this keeps her alienated from any sense of grounded identification with either. Yet, the painful sense of displacement and exile she feels throughout her trips away from home at times affects her objective sense of judgment, where she fails to transcend the dichotomy of home and abroad and the associations she attaches to each location, culture, and people.

Samman starts her travelogue in an unconventional manner, with two introductions. The first introduction contemplates the idea of movement and travel and how it affects her own self-perception and her perception of the world around her:

There is nothing better than instability to trigger the intellect, and thus it is hated. I want to get out of the sight of people and go to a quiet place where I can become the master of my own self. There are many dimensions of my identity that I don't understand, and thus I need some alone time to make sense of them. Mobility and travel get their value from the fear they initially cause, where parts of our identity get disrupted in order to help us gain a better sense of who we are. Some people who fear such change are those who hide behind their desks in isolated offices that shelter them. However, travel is what strips away that final shelter and exposes one's identity. (Samman 5)

In this passage, Samman points out that movement is what triggers her to exercise critical thinking, which is an unsettling, fearful activity on its own. However, this very unsettling feeling produced by movement and critical thinking is necessary for her to understand the true essence of her identity and personality. She basically underscores two modes of movement that create this unsettling sense of fear: escape and general travel. For Samman, both modes of travel force us to distance ourselves from everything, including the familiar surroundings of the workplace, to find ourselves in a place where we totally expose the "self" in an estranged setting, allowing an unbiased opportunity to self-evaluation. Specifically, this allows her the opportunity to view the world and her own self anew, which finally leads to an unbiased sense of understanding of the world and the self. From this point on, her defining tropes of movement and travel are

controlled by this initial sense of flight and escape in order to gain the opportunity for a better understanding of the self.

In the second introduction, Samman moves to addressing the readers of her travelogue, asking them to assist her in choosing an alternative proper title for her narrative from a list of titles she provides, among which the very first option sums up the purpose behind her travels: “I moved... and I wrote” (7). If it were not for Samman’s departure from her homeland, the readers she addresses and the subsequent readers of her travelogue would not have had the opportunity to obtain a copy of the textual narrative, nor would they have had the opportunity to participate, even if symbolically, in her journeys. This symbolic invitation to choose a fitting alternative title becomes very important, as she aims at making her readers feel as if they are accompanying her on the actual geographic journey she embarks on. Both, the metaphor of “narrative is travel” developed by travel theorist Kai Mikkonen based on the metaphor of “travel as writing” developed by travel theorist Michel Butor, are useful to understanding how Samman invites the readers to participate in her travels by choosing a title for the travelogue; she invites them to take part in the narrative as a means of participating in her actual travels. Michele Butor explains, “to travel, at least in a certain manner, is to write (first of all because to travel is to read), and to write is to travel” (53). Butor’s analogy between the act of reading, traveling, and writing is what Samman basically does. When writing her travelogue, she engages her readers in the narrative process as a means for them to participate in her travels since her goal behind traveling is to write a travelogue. Conversely, the act of speaking directly to the readers of her travelogue is significant since through this act, Samman invites the reader to participate not only in the reading process, but also in the travels themselves. Thus, to read Samman’s travelogue is to travel with her on her journey through the various countries she visits and to register her experiences of



place as if they were the readers' own, writing her narrative on her own travels. Also, this second introduction highlights the main tropes that will continue to highlight both the sense of alienation and rootlessness and the desire to connect to people and the new cultures she encounters that motivate her throughout her journey.

Samman dedicates her travelogue to her "beloved Salman al-akhadar," a Damascene who changed his name to Sam fourteen years after leaving Damascus (11). In the dedication, Samman notes that not only did Salman change his Arabic name, but he also left behind the Arab world, the Arabic language, and his Arab past for good, cutting himself totally off from his Arab heritage. When talking about Sam, Samman laments the way he has disconnected himself totally from his Arab identity purposefully, forgetting the language and as a result never being able to read her travelogue in his forever-lost mother tongue. Sam's voluntary uprootedness from his culture, identity, and language causes her to shed a tear every time she remembers him because even the most naturalized elements of his Arab identity, which is the language, is lost, and thus his return becomes an impossible option.

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics, at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. (Thiongo 441)

By purposefully forgetting his Arabic mother tongue, Sam chooses to also disconnect himself from his Arab identity and thus perceive himself, the world around him, and others in isolation from his past. All this is painful for Samman, who through writing her travelogue in Arabic emphasizes the importance of holding on to one's original language, identity, and culture.

However, it is very important to keep in mind that throughout her travels, Samman does actually

experience at times a sense of loss of certain elements of her Arab identity and culture, which can be a positive thing, since it enables her to view her own culture in a critical manner. It allows her to de-center home and her own identity when examining them in the light of the other worlds she comes to encounter.

When Samman leaves her home in Damascus to London in 1966, little does she know that the consequence will be an everlasting state of exile, rootlessness, and wandering. When she reaches London, she receives an official letter condemning her for leaving the country without a governmental permit and thus sentencing her to a three-month imprisonment upon her return. Out of fear, Samman does not return to Syria to renew her Syrian passport and consequently loses her Syrian citizenship, becoming stateless in London. During this year, not only does Samman feel abandoned by her government, she feels cast out by her society and relatives, who accuse her at times of being a “fallen woman”:

I stood truly alone in this fierce world, facing all the forces that were against me. I spent [those years] between Lebanon and various European countries, working and living like any young man alone. These years are what formed me. [...] During those years, I confronted others as a foreigner in a foreign land without the protection of family, social status, or money, and I learned what I hadn't known before. [...] The hardest lesson I learned was my final discovery of the superficiality of the bourgeois Damascene society that used to consider me during those years as good as dead – ‘a fallen woman’ – whereas I was in reality a woman starting to live her life and an artist gaining in awareness [of life around her]. (Samman qtd. in Vinson)

Despite the pain Samman suffers because of the abandonment by her family and society, she finds herself experiencing a life of independence and growth. However, this forced state of exile is sudden, and so she finds herself dislocated and displaced in every place she visits and travels to afterward. This forced state of exile affects Samman's perception of the different cultures and locations she encounters and thus prevents her from connecting with any of them, even until the very end of her travels. However, not connecting to any of the cultures she encounters becomes

a positive thing, as Samman is able to examine her “self” and her own Arab identity with the same sense of detachment she uses when examining the “Other” and the “other cultures” she encounters during her travels. Samman looks at the various places she visits and the cultures she encounters sometimes as a detached observer and critic, allowing a multifaceted approach to viewing those locations and the cultures they integrate. However, it remains important to note that Samman’s observations are ones that are filtered through and highly affected by her subjective lens, where she does demonstrate a narrow outlook to the way she views the other peoples and cultures she encounters.

In her article, “Other than myself/my other self,” Trinh Minh-ha discusses the way journey affects the travelers’ perception of place, both home and abroad, and the way it affects their perception of their own identity:

Every voyage can be said to involve a re-siting of boundaries. The travelling self is here, both the self that moves physically from one place to another, following “public routes and beaten tracks” within a mapped movement, and a self that embarks on an undetermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere. (Minh-ha 9)

Minh-ha talks about the physical and metaphorical journey the traveler embarks on, underscoring that the physical journey is structured in a way that one maps a certain geographic location and comes to an end: the end of the geographic journey. However, the metaphorical journey the traveler embarks on is one that is constantly in a state of boundary shifting, where examining and re-examining one’s own identity and culture against the other and the other culture is an ongoing process that never ends (9). Samman experiences ongoing transformations in her identity throughout her travels through a similar process. Not only does she stop at negotiating, defining, and redefining her own identity and culture and the identity of the others and the culture of the

other she encounters in a dichotomous structure, but she goes further, exploring the possibilities of an “elsewhere” that incorporates a new subjectivity. Becoming stateless while wandering between different European and Arab countries and cultures gives her the possibility of a more detached sense of cultural identity, which causes her to make her wandering self the point of departure when examining and scrutinizing the different cultures she encounters. As the title of her travelogue, *The Body Is a Traveling Suitcase*, suggests, she makes her body and her unsettled subjectivity the place of departure from which she negotiates identities, cultures, and places she encounters, including her own. As a result, her body becomes the “elsewhere” that she constructs anew, and this frees her from the restrictions of operating within a rigid, homogenous identity in favor of a rootless cosmopolitan one. Also, her body becomes the dominating travel trope that carries the here, the there, the elsewhere, and the combination of all three together in a newly constructed home that she encompasses. Most importantly, when she does encompass different cultural identities, she refuses the primacy of an authentic self and highlights the complexity of a multilayered identity.

Since Samman begins her travels with a sense of lost identity, she starts the first chapter of her travelogue by reflecting on the painful mode of exile she found herself plunged into. The moments of departure from Lebanon and arrival in London are highly symbolic, reflecting the emotional and psychological state of mind that accompanies her throughout her travels. Upon her very first encounter with London, she recounts how she was “received” by the severe cold in London, as opposed to the warmth she left back in Beirut:

I was received by the frost in London. And I remembered that the sun had set once and for all with the face of the person who saw me off at the airport in Beirut and it hasn't risen ever since. It was six in the evening. And I said to myself let it be a winter evening I spend next to the fireplace. Then came seven. And eight. And nine. And then ten but the evening wasn't dark. The sky seemed as if to transform into a robot's eye: big, hollow,

and grey but with no eyelashes or tears. [...] The night skies in London are like dead canvas hung up high just like a ceiling. And the moon, the wandering poet of the night, doesn't even reach the frame of that sky. And so I realized that the London evening doesn't get dark before eleven. At that moment I realized what the magic of the East meant to the English women. And the Eastern desert that is clean of the smoke of chimneys, with its warmth and moon, is an essential part of that magic of the East. (Samman13)

This very first encounter with London is crucial on many levels. It is this encounter with London that sets the mood for the encounters with other places Samman travels to. She reacts with a sense of alienation and estrangement from the foreign environment she gets in contact with. Not only that, whenever she encounters a new place, she cannot help but directly compare it to home. This direct comparison between London and home translates into an acute awareness that during her travels she will continue to compare and contrast being at home and being abroad, a dichotomous way of thinking that renders her observations highly subjective even while she claims to be objective, where home and abroad are clearly divided, failing to transcend the dichotomy of home and abroad and the association she attaches to each place.

Interestingly, she not only compares London and Beirut to one another according to her own perception, she compares the way the East, its nights, and the desert are viewed by the other, namely English women. Samman highlights that through allowing space in her narrative to present the views of others, she does not allow the painful mode of exile to dominate her narrative or color her judgment of the places she visits. Rather, this state of exile allows her to first present her own perceptions of places and people and then bring into focus the perceptions the others have about her own culture and identity, while presenting a critique of both perceptions and viewpoints. Having this double observation allows her to assume different positions, where she at times presents her views of the others, while at other times she puts herself in the others' position, where they objectively view her. However, when Samman claims

to understand the way English women view the East and its nights, she unfortunately, presents an objective judgment.

After the first cold night she spends in London, Samman decides to explore the streets of the city to try to connect to anything familiar she might encounter. However, she starts touring Soho Street, haunted by an unsettling sense of estrangement toward the physical surroundings she passes. The windows of buildings are too frightening for her, and she imagines that a dagger could be thrust from any of the dark windows. The “yellow lights” in the street create in her a sense of “fear, anxiety and illness” (14). Entering the street and walking through it, she contemplates how it makes one “feel worried and anxious” because of the unfamiliarity of the place (14); this sense of estrangement does not come from one source but rather from experiencing the unknown, an unfamiliar setting, as if it carries enmity toward the person who encounters it for the first time. It is important to note that Samman’s first encounter with any foreign environment is characterized by a sense of fear and anxiety, with which she overburdens herself by assuming that the foreign environment receives her with those very same sentiments. It seems that Samman constantly projects her own fear onto her new surroundings to underscore that the first encounter with an unfamiliar other is naturally shrouded with an element of strangeness and alienation.

To overcome her sense of alienation and fear, Samman is reminded of a more pleasant place, Bals Street, which ran through her university back in Beirut. She starts recalling how peaceful it was when she used to overlook it from the classroom during class. Every memory of Bals Street, including “its lights that aren’t yellow,” brings about feelings of comfort and inner calm, as opposed to the feelings Soho Street has triggered in her (14). It becomes a strategy for her to constantly compare her immediate surroundings, especially ones she encounters for the

first time, with an equivalent element from back home. These immediate comparisons she draws become a constant reminder of the in-between space she occupies despite her physical location. It is very important to note that this type of comparison keeps her in an ambiguous state, where her past is always brought alive in a present that she does not easily accept. However, after she recovers from the initial shock, she is able to distance herself from preliminary judgment and to reach a more informed perception that is less affected by her past.

Another element of comparison between Beirut and London Samman elaborates on as she continues her observations of the British society and the wider Western culture generally is the West's lack of spirituality, as opposed to the rich Eastern spiritual cultures. While still in London, she will spend her time sitting at Mustafa's Cafe, a coffee shop owned by a Pakistani man. What strikes her there is the sense of spirituality, lacking elsewhere in London, that comes with Mustafa himself from the East, a world that has been traditionally associated with spirituality, according to Samman. Mustafa's facial features alone have an "exotic Eastern magical effect that dominates all the youthful men surrounding him" (14). She describes the way the local men approach Mustafa: "They speak to him with such kindness and utmost respect that I imagine their appreciation of him comes from their hunger for a spiritual life they associate with the East" (14). Undeniably, her comment on the locals' admiration of Mustafa is a criticism of the lack in English culture of the spirituality that a person from the East longs to have and enjoy, especially that Samman stresses throughout the travelogue the importance of spirituality that brings about a sense of fulfillment. These bold dichotomous distinctions Samman continues to structure her observations accordingly are ones that render her sense of judgment of other cultures problematic, where she is unable to present an objective view of the English culture

without coloring it with her own perceptions of how the culture of the West, specifically Europe, is opposite to the cultures of the East, the Middle East specifically.

Following Samman's personal perceptions of place, Mustafa's Cafe, a hangout for such famous persons and celebrities as members of the Rockers and the Beatles, is a place where the East and some of its values, represented by Mustafa as well as Samman herself, come face-to-face with Europe and its values. Samman visits the café to observe the famous celebrities who come to express their individuality through such things as their music and their unique dress styles. She notices that the Beatles and the regular customers of the café have a common characteristic: they consider themselves rebels against the dull, material Western way of life, but they do so through material expression that is only a thin disguise over that existence, which remains unchanged. For example, the Beatles, who dedicated their music to expressing their individuality and revolting against materialistic culture, have done so superficially, through wearing unique leather pullovers that present them solely in a different fashion style than others (15). But their unique dress code does not really represent the true spirit of revolt: change and revolt happen not through a superficial makeover of one's appearance but rather through impacting actual social issues, like solving the issue of poverty and achieving social justice. Her critical observation of the café locals leads her to make general conclusions about the materialism of Western culture and how it is destructive to human existence. Her criticism of the mechanized structure of Western societies, where people are more robot-like than human, consumed with work and pressured into conformity, is ironic, since she does not provide actual details of how the return to spirituality represents a viable solution. It just seems that even then she cannot distance her judgment of others from her own biases. Despite the fact that Samman poses as a cosmopolitan persona, she continues to other European societies as if they are a



homogeneous entity, casting her subjective judgment upon them, without challenging her own preconceived stereotypes about the European societies.

Moreover, while being critical about the way the Rockers and the Beatles express individuality, Samman attributes this revolt to the loss of familial ties in the West. It is true that she is not an advocate of the family having a strong grip over the freedom of the individual, yet she sees that the total dismantling of the family institution and its values is a loss to society as a whole; it can lead to freedom, but this freedom is destructive, and “it cancels itself because it becomes the type of freedom that is taken away by the city one lives in. It’s the type of freedom where the individual chooses to die without anybody dedicating time to stopping it. It’s the freedom where the community does not grant the individual personal freedom, but rather it stops caring about the destiny of the individual” (16). That is, when the family starts to deteriorate and loses its ability to nurture, love and care disappear with it. Samman values family love and containment the same way she values individual freedom. It seems that what she advocates while observing the English culture is the achievement of a balance between individual freedom and the family institution, where one does not cancel the other. Her travel and touring in London for the day comes to an end while she continues to contemplate the sense of loss of spirituality, individualism, and security of the family in London and Western society generally.

Unfortunately, even while Samman inserts her own perspective on how a balance should be achieved between acquiring individual freedoms and yet grounding it within the family institution, she judges English culture’s failure to achieve such balance from her single day’s observation touring the streets of London. Even though Samman at times seems to pose as a cosmopolitan, she fails to embrace different traditions, customs, and ideologies, and thus fails to

rise above the binary thinking of East-West. This narrow way of observing the other while journeying into different cultural spaces, makes of Samman a highly opinionated cosmopolitan.

Moreover, Samman criticizes the lack of communication between individuals in London. She believes that the English suffer from isolation and lack of authentic social relationships that pushes them to start a typical, lifeless conversation with total strangers most of the time. As she is at the train station waiting for her train, a stranger says to her, "Nice weather, right?" "Good weather' is the traditional greeting expression the English use when starting a conversation during moments of kind verbal exchange. It is the only expression that breaks through the awkward moments of silence that engulf individuals due to their isolation from each other, but then it allows the unfolding of a long free-of-charge conversation" (32). What bothers her about this type of exchange is its lack of genuine concern and care.

And yet, despite this criticism, she attributes the way the English communicate mainly to the machine-like lifestyle the whole society suffers from. Commenting on this lifestyle, Samman quotes the Beatles: "It's been a hard day's night and I've been working like a dog" (41). She further explains that the English are not alone in being guilty of this; they are similar to other Western societies that "are always running breathless after the train, their office hour, etc. They eat their fast food while running amidst crowds and their brain is just like their stomach; it only digests canned food. They no longer have time to search for the truth of existence nor to exercise all their feelings, for the heart where love grows in on a large humanistic level will never be stingy to share it with other individuals wherever they are" (42). Her critique, particularly of English society and of Western society at large, comes basically from her unconscious drawing of parallels between Arab societies and the West, a biased observation for the mere fact that she draws her conclusions about different cultures and societies by making her experience of her

own culture the point of departure for such comparisons. Also, making blanket conclusions about all European cultures based on her experience of London alone discredits her sense of judgment.

As discussed above, Samman in London assumes the role of the observer and critic, but she does not actually look objectively at London and the culture she encounters. It seems that whenever she observes an element of British culture, she judges it through her own subjective perspective, and her opinion becomes her point of departure for viewing the Other. However, even though she judges London through her own subjectivity, she remains aware that she is not presenting an objective perspective, since that is an impossible position for anyone to occupy when viewing other people, cultures, and societies. It is important to note that Samman starts her travels and journeys by subconsciously assuming the role of the biased observer and critic when perceiving the other, because without centering her subjectivity as the point of departure she will not be able to detach herself from that biased self.

As the plane takes off from London en route to Greece, Samman starts reflecting on the meaning of journey and travel and what a person achieves when traveling. For her, the most important trope that concerns her when traveling is the moment of departure:

I leave, I leave, and I leave. And if I return, that is because I plan to leave once more. I continue to leave maybe to prove to myself that the real departure is when I depart from myself. However, with every departure, I feel that I get closer to my true self! [...] And perhaps I constantly leave because every departure leads to home; the home that lives within us. All the planes I board eventually land me home. (44)

Samman's constant departure is motivated by the desire not only to explore and discover geographic locations, cultures, and peoples, but also to discover her own subjectivity. It seems that she represents the meaning of home and the politics of location by whom they affect her perception of self, subjectivity, and identity, which are constantly shifting and changing.

Likewise, her sense of place and her definition of home do not provide her with a sense of stability; rather, they connect her to an identity, whatever form and shape that identity takes. Her concept of home is not the physical structure that one resides in; rather, home resides within the person, since she connects home to identity. For her, the experience one gains through travel and the way it shapes a person's identity is what creates the sense home within her. And since the notion of both home and identity are connected to the experience one gains while living, despite the place of residency, these two concepts will always be reconstituted and changed according to the experience one goes through. Also, what follows the departure from one place is an arrival at a new place, which for Samman marks the arrival to a new aspect of her identity she was not previously familiar with. Her constant state of departure reflects the reconfiguration of her identity, an aspect that she thoroughly enjoys experiencing while traveling.

Sarup points out two different ways of viewing place and its relationship to identity, providing two views on identity: the modernist view and the traditionalist view:

Places are created through capital investment. Capital is about technological change and the expansion of places. Places should always be seen in a historical and economic context. In recent years, money capital has become more mobile. Places are created, expanded, then images are constructed to represent and sell these places. [...]. In contrast to this Marxist view there is a phenomenological approach. Heidegger, for example, believed that place is the locale of Being. He was very aware that time and spaces have been transformed through technological change. He shared with Marx a dislike of the market and was antagonistic to the fetishization of commodities. In Heidegger's view there were authentic and inauthentic places. He thought about "dwelling", and place and placelessness. He was aware of rootedness and thought of those people who had lost their rootedness in place." (96)

Samman subscribes to the traditionalist view when talking about place in general and the places she visits in particular and their effect on her identity. Since she stresses that for her, home is the place that resides within, it seems that she reiterates Heidegger's view on the relationship between place and "Being." Similar to Heidegger's remark, "place is the locale of Being,"

Samman believes that each place she visits is a place that sets her on a path to becoming. She acknowledges that her identity is affected by each place she visits and that her journeys and trips are actually the locale of her becoming. Every place she stops by contributes to the making of her identity, and thus with her ongoing travels her identity is transformed and recomposed along the road. And since her subjectivity is constantly being altered and changed, the best part of her trip is the moment of departure, where departure stands for her willingness to move forward in the making, remaking, and becoming of her identity, in addition to her willingness to make every destination she visits a home that resides within her.

Moreover, the process of traveling and moving from one place to another is very important to her, as she believes that the process of traveling around and journeying is as important as the destination one sets out to reach: "The most enticing part of traveling is to enjoy the moving process as much as to enjoy the moment of reaching the destination" (44). As the plane flies over the Mediterranean en route to Greece, she starts contemplating the magnificence of a country like Greece and its great city of Athens. She believes that every traveler to Greece must appreciatively reflect upon the remnants of this ancient civilization where "human beings conversed with the gods for the first time" and listen to the whispers of Plato's philosophy in the walls of the city (46). For her this symbolic reflection is indeed the occasion to acknowledge the richness of the identity of the cities and countries she visits prior to physically experiencing those destinations.

Samman's travels not only allow her to view, admire, and criticize others, but also to see how others view her and her Arab identity generally. Also, she finds herself simultaneously disappointed by the West and the Western media's treatment and representation of her Arab character and identity, while at the same time she projects her own criticism regarding her Arab

identity and society generally. It is important to note that her awareness of her Arab identity and the way it is viewed by the Western world marks the beginning of her political journey and its representation in her literary works. Around the time of the Arab-Israeli Six Day War, which ends with the defeat of the Arabs and the victory of Israel, Samman makes several trips to different European countries, including Switzerland, England, France, and Germany, where she is bothered by the misrepresentation of Arabs in the West and Western media.

During her trip to Switzerland in 1967, Samman has an opportunity to stay at a youth hostel, where she notices that the majority of the students staying there hold the utmost admiration and respect for Israel, the only country in the Middle East whose existence they seem to know about and acknowledge. While playing a game in which each player describes the country he/she comes from while the others try to guess the name of the country, Samman mentions several characteristics of Lebanon, including warm sun, history, religions, prophets, and the Mediterranean. The students find it hard to guess Samman's place of origin, and they are silent for a few moments. Then a student from Switzerland guesses, "Israel, of course!" (62), after which several other students mention how much they have enjoyed the beaches of Haifa and Jaffa during their trips to Israel. What bothers Samman particularly about the students' reaction to the mere mention of Israel is that they seem to have been brought up to think of Israel as the only center of civilization in the Middle East. After the game is over and the students gather for dinner, Samman is pursued by a fellow student who insists on knowing the name of her country. When Samman answers, "Syria ... Lebanon," the student dismissively replies, "You mean a neighboring country to Israel?" (64). And even before Samman has the opportunity to reply, the student hands her a booklet about Israel. From this incident and her observation during her later visits around Europe, she comes to the conclusion that Israel has sold Europe on a

narrative of victimization, where they have risen in the Middle East as a strong and flourishing country despite the harshness they face from the neighboring countries (64).

However, what Samman finds most disturbing is that the West and Western media are biased when representing the Israeli narrative because they adopt it completely without challenging it by acknowledging the existence of another narrative, the Arab Palestinian one. She undergoes shock from what she calls the media war that Israel constantly wins because of the backing and support of the West. What she calls Israeli propaganda to gain the West's sympathy is not limited to Western media and news outlets, but also includes other forms of representation, including music, literature, and the arts in general.

In France, while heading to the bus station, Samman overhears the lyrics of a song being performed by a street singer about Israel. She describes the song as one that “speaks of the peaceful people who live in Urshalim. It’s about the thirty thousand trees they’ve planted and about the Arabs who deprive them access to the necessary water resource—the Jordan River—to water them!!!” (68). Not only that, when Samman reaches her hotel in Paris and is about to check in, she notices an announcement on the hotel billboard for a documentary that will be shown that night, followed by the opening of an art gallery. And then later in the evening, as she passes by a bookstore, she notices a book about the Israeli cause in a showcase. She scans through the book and summarizes its subject matter: “The return of the Israeli people, who have been homeless and dispossessed of their land since the days of the Pharaohs, to their promised land to fight the primitive Arabs in order to civilize them [...]” (86). If anything, Samman cannot but admire the commitment the West displays toward Israel, as if it is their adopted child. Her critique of the West and its attitude towards Israel is that it highlights the dispossession suffered

by Israelis in the past, but when Palestinians suffer injustice, their just narrative of victimization and dispossession is underrepresented or even totally neglected.

Samman shows how biased the Western media is, not only when neglecting the Palestinian narrative, but also when representing Arabs generally. During a trip to London, she watches a program on British TV and notices that the only Arab in the show is the enemy of the protagonist. This kind of representation makes Samman question whether the show was basically adopting the Israeli view regarding Arabs and Palestinians, and when she expresses her annoyance to an English friend regarding this, he defends the show, claiming that in every show there must be a villain who is either from Japan, China, or the Arab world. Not convinced, she continues to wonder why Israelis never appear as villains in such shows and concludes that all British media is controlled by Israeli propaganda.

Following her disappointment with the representation of Arabs in the West and the Western media, Samman endures an unfortunate experience at the airport in West Berlin that makes her reexamine her Arab identity and its relationship to the West. Upon approaching the security check at the airport after de-planing and presenting her passport to the officer in charge, she is shocked by the sudden reaction of the officer, who immediately takes her passport from her after learning that she is a Syrian/Lebanese Arab. The officer starts making phone calls and talking in German, a language she does not understand. After she has waited few minutes to get her passport back, two guards approach her and snatch away her camera to be checked and her suitcase to be inspected. Then she finds herself led to an office, where she is inspected by a female officer, who scans her body to make sure she is not carrying any dangerous tools (388). At that moment, she starts laughing hysterically, for she does not expect such uncalled-for attention. Upon leaving the Berlin airport in a taxi, she pulls a mirror from her bag and takes a



long look at herself, wondering what it could have been that caused the officer to call for her to be inspected. What appears to her in the mirror is a mere reflection of her face: a face with a light-brown complexion, just like those of millions of other Arabs. Only then does she realize that her Arab light-brown complexion is what triggered the mistrust and suspicion of the airport officer from the beginning. She realizes how the Arab image in the Western collective imagination has been distorted because of the Arab–Israeli conflict and the media’s biased representation of Arabs as figures of mistrust and suspicion.

Because Samman realizes that the image of Arabs in the Western consciousness is at its worst, she further investigates why this image in artistic and literary representations has not been challenged by Arab people, governments, and mainstream media. She believes that the Arab identity has been not only misrepresented by the West but also neglected by Arabs themselves: the Arabs cultural unity have always been neglected by its own people and governments. The reason behind her constant departure and journeying throughout Europe is that she is prohibited by the Syrian government to access her homeland after her initial trip to London.

Being abandoned by her own government and not having anybody to support her or protest the injustice she was faced with in her homeland has made of Samman a harsh critic of the Syrian government and Arab governments generally. Also, when comparing the individual freedom a person exercises in the West to that of a person from the Arab world, she affirms sadly that there is freedom of speech in the West, but the Arab person is censored and controlled by the government. When talking about the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, she affirms that it was a defeat not only because the Arabs lost to Israel, but also because it was the actual outcome of the twenty years of oppression and repression the Arab people had endured living under dictatorships: “It was not only a literal defeat but rather it was the defeat of the Arab people

before its rulers and the defeat and failure of those rulers to understand their people and represent them” (77).

The limitations on individual expression are not limited to speech; similar limitations are imposed on artistic expressions and representations. Even the committed literature written by Arab writers about Arab causes, especially the Palestinian dispossession, Samman describes as in its infancy, not in a place to ever compete with the literature that is committed to defending and promoting Israel and the Israeli cause.

Toward the end of her travelogue, Samman writes about the mixed feelings she has while transiting from one place to another. She claims that while she is in transit mode, her sense of detachment and alienation is at its peak, because the state of transiting disconnects her from both the place she departs from and the place of arrival. This state of in-betweenness is actually where she sees her identity located; a neutral place controlled by neither the past nor the future: the past is left behind when she leaves the last city of departure, and the future is still unknown, since she has not yet reached the city of arrival. According to Samman, this state of transiting actually represents life itself, a place where people are temporarily spending time en route to another place beyond their knowledge. However, what she likes about this state of transiting is that it is the place where she starts looking at things clearly (500). She reflects on her identity and what has become of her throughout her travels and states that the one thing she does not get disconnected from, even while transiting, is Damascus and the smell of jasmine that reminds her of home (501). This type of romantic nostalgia to home Samman exhibits toward the end of the travelogue demonstrates her final failure to become the cosmopolitan rootless persona she tries to inhabit during her travel narrative. It becomes apparent to the reader of her travelogue that the pains of dislocation and the state of exile she feels while traveling limits her ability finally to end

her travel narrative in an objective manner. Samman remains entrapped by her personal perception of place since she continues to maintain home and her own experience of home a point of departure when examining and experiencing other people, cultures, and locations.

Samman concludes her text by stating that she will leave traveling behind and settle in Beirut because she is sick of the world of electric hotels in Europe. She is sick of the cold weather and the atmosphere that faces her every time she leaves one European city for another and one country for another (513). Eventually, she decides to return to Beirut in 1976, thinking that returning to Lebanon will bring back to her the warmth she feels when being in an Arab capital, the warmth of a place like home. She does so and acquires Lebanese citizenship upon marrying a Lebanese man. She closes her travelogue with the thought that “all the riches of the worlds one visits brought together will never be able to purchase that root that one plants in a place called home, where one not only lives but gets properly nourished” (513). This emphasis on leaving the world of traveling and returning back home is a note she leaves her readers with as a reminder that roots and home are always essential to be acknowledged as the initial places of departure, where one leaves behind roots that remain important, despite the places one to which travels, journeys, or moves. Even though Samman does choose to return to Lebanon after traveling throughout Europe, she will leave once more with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war the same year she returns, and ever since, she has lived between Beirut and Paris.

When Samman evokes the trope of returning to roots at the end of her travel narrative, it becomes problematic: travel and displacement are conditions that naturally de-center constructs associated with roots, such as essence, origin, and belonging.<sup>xxvii</sup> These concepts attached to roots present essentialist notions of identity and subjectivity that undermine the travel experiences Samman goes through, as she claims to be a rootless cosmopolitan traveler. In

addition, Samman's inability to deconstruct her dichotomous observation of home and abroad and her inability to rise above her binary perceptions of the East–West dichotomy during her travels, renders her travelogue subjective and highly opinionated despite her claims otherwise.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Transformative Journeys: Social Class, Culture -Crossing, and Hybridity in Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun***

#### **Introduction**

Ahdaf Soueif's 1992 novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, covers the period between 1967 until 1980 in the personal life of her female protagonist, Asya al-Ulama. The narrative chronicles the tumultuous personal spatial, emotional, psychological and sexual journey Asya goes through while living as a hybrid diasporic subject between Egypt and England, and during her short visits to Beirut, Italy and the United States. Born to an upper class Egyptian, Western-educated family—her mother has finished her PhD in England and is working as an English professor at Cairo University—Asya is raised and educated in both England and Egypt. It is in Egypt that Asya first becomes familiar with English language and culture, just like her other friends who belong to the same social stratum, where their knowledge of the English language and culture marks them as the modern elite in Egyptian society at the time. Even though the novel follows closely the journey and the cross-cultural personal experiences Asya goes through that shape her personal identity, Soueif contextualizes Asya's experiences through narrating social and political events and changes that take place in Egypt at the time. However, these political and social changes remain external factors that do not interfere directly in Asya's personal life development; they only provide grounding to the way the social life in Egypt has changed and how this change has contributed to Asya's perception of others, her identity formation, and her individual journey towards self-realization and actualization.

Analyzing *In the Eye of the Sun* according to Soueif's theoretical writings on the concept of the imaginary space, Mezzaterra and "the common ground" (4), as well as Homi Bhabha's

concept of the “third space” of identity enunciation and “hybridity” (Rutherford 211), I argue that Asya’s hybrid identity is initially acquired in Egypt due to her social class, but then it becomes grounded firmly as she travels to England, where she constantly engages in the act of identity negotiation and self transformation. Asya does not define her identity through her struggle against an extremist traditional Islamic culture in Egypt nor against Western imperialism; her complex hybridity is one that is acquired gradually, starting from her upbringing during the period of what Soueif terms Mezzaterra in the Egypt of the mid-1960s to her journey to England. It is only when she manages to reclaim her individual agency by constructing a personal, hybrid life that balances her Egyptian and English experience that she is able to define herself. Asya towards the end of her narrative does not attempt to resolve the paradoxes and conflicts that she obtains from experiencing Egypt and England, but she rather is able to negotiate a common space to translate herself into. Yet, upon her final return to Egypt, Asya’s hybridity is threatened by the shrinking Mezzaterra space in Egypt that she senses, causing her to further embody feelings of alienation and detachment from her homeland.

Prior to the physical journeys she embarks on, Asya was brought up in a space that was defined by the elite, upper-middle class in the Egyptian society she belonged to, where cultures met and fused, especially the Egyptian and English, constructing a hybrid social class that did not define itself according to the political antagonism between Egypt and England at the time. Conversely, during the geographic journeys she undertakes from Egypt to England (and her short trips to Beirut, Italy, and the United States) and then back to Egypt, Asya acquires a hybrid identity that puts to question any notion of a fixed affiliation to a specific place, whether it be Egypt, her place of birth and early upbringing, or England, the place where she experiences full independence and maturity. Her journey and travels become the means that allow Asya to

develop a voice, agency, and a sensibility to negotiate her hybrid experience of self, places, people, history, and politics in the different territories she inhabits. Also, Asya goes through a journey that involves reclaiming her psychological, emotional, and sexual desires, as she learns how to locate an agency of empowerment in the different places she inhabits, mainly Egypt and England, against those who would have otherwise denied her agency, acquiring a unique hybrid identity of her own construction.

It is the trope of movement and travel that allows Asya's personal hybrid identity to constantly engage in the act of translating herself in the different places she occupies, as well as translating the places she gets in contact with, finally inhabiting what Bhabha calls "the third space" of identity articulation, where her identity is in a constant state of "enunciation" and transformation despite the location she settles in. The following elaboration on this "third space" gives us insight into understanding the way Asya defines and identifies with her hybrid identity:

The act of cultural translation (both as representation and as reproduction) denies the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture, than we see that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Rutherford 211)

True to this definition, Soueif's construction of Asya's identity is one that refuses any notion of a fixed identification with a place of origin or the place she later inhabits. It is as Asya's identity is being (trans)formed by the different places she occupies that she also attempts to engage in an imaginative construction of the places she occupies to fit her hybrid identity. This hybrid subjectivity Asya acquires is not necessarily one that celebrates cultural difference; rather, it complicates and defies any fixed construction of the Arab Muslim woman's subjectivity and

experience in any place she inhabits. In this sense, Soueif's narrative represents what Bhabha calls "beyond," occupying the borderline between the past and present, which represents the "in-between" space that becomes a "terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1-2). Toward the end of the narrative, Asya realizes that occupying this in-between space is a lonely site that she will have to accept as a natural condition of her displacement and dislocation even within the boundaries of her home, Egypt. Yet this in-between space becomes the site and location that grants her the agency to speak up for herself against the competing discourses that will try to define her according to preconceived notions of her identity as an Anglo-Arab Muslim woman.

Soueif engages the Anglo-Arab encounter in the majority of her fictional writings, where she explores the possibility of a positive encounter between Egypt and England while questioning both the "continuing pressures of Western imperialism, and conservative anti-modernist cultural Islamism" (Nash 29). The majority of her characters, especially her female protagonists, occupy a space that allows the negotiation of the duality of their experiences in Egypt and in England. Soueif is mainly concerned in her fiction with representing the experience of Arab woman characters who oscillate between the East and West and finally manage to negotiate their cross-cultural experience and resolve the tension that exists between those two cultural spaces, claiming a unique hybrid identity of their own construction. In creating complex, multi-layered Arab woman characters in her fiction, Soueif displays an acute awareness of Western misrepresentation of Arab women's identities and experiences, the traditional stereotyping of the role of the Arab woman within her own culture, and the misunderstandings that could possibly occur in any cross-cultural encounter. Due to this cross-cultural experience,



Soueif's female characters display an awareness of their position within these two competing discourses by challenging both, while allowing their positive cultural experiences of the East, Egypt specifically, and West, England, to interact, compete, and intersect at times, finally grounding themselves in a personalized, constructed in-between place that allows what Edward Said calls in his article, "The Anglo-Arab Encounter," a "complex hybrid" identity to emerge (407).

Soueif's four major fictional narratives, which include her two short story collections, *Aisha* and *The Sandpiper*, and her two novels, *In the Eye of the Sun* and *The Map of Love*, explore the complex negotiation the female protagonists engage, dealing with issues related to misunderstandings and misconceptions they encounter during their East-West experience. Among the issues her female protagonists negotiate are the East-West power relations, colonial and postcolonial politics, Orientalist misrepresentations, traditional cultural stereotypes, gender dynamics and sexual politics, themes that appear in any Anglo-Arab encounter represented in literature. What is unique about Soueif's treatment of these themes is that she manages to situate her protagonists in complex hybrid spaces that allow them to reclaim their personal identities and individual narratives without preferring one culture over the other. Susan Darraj has argued that Soueif's "hybrid" works are intensely post-colonial in nature:

[Soueif] subverts the colonizer/colonized hierarchy by presenting England a picture of its colonial past and postcolonial present, complete with all accompanying tensions, thus turning her Egyptian postcolonial gaze on England's eye of poser. Her work gives the colonized a voice not only to be heard, but to influence the English/Arab literary landscape as she describes Arab women exposed to British culture and influence (and vice versa), who seek to find their own voices and take control of the narrative of their lives. (92)

While Soueif does indeed address themes linked to the East-West encounter and the tension that exists between the two spaces due to the history of postcolonialism in Egypt and the imbalanced power relations in the Anglo-Arab encounter, these tensions do not define the struggles her protagonists' experience. In *In the Eye of the Sun*, Soueif addresses the tension and paradoxes that occur in the course of the Anglo-Arab encounter, yet from Asya's personal point of view. Asya does not look at the East-West or Egypt-England encounter as a clash of civilizations, but rather she views it as a relationship based on her personal attachment to the two places despite the colonial past that ties the two places together. After relocating to England to pursue her PhD and while walking on the bank of the Thames, Asya remembers the Nile and relates the experience of viewing the Thames as one that reminds her of the majestic view of the Nile back home. Yet, as she continues walking, the view of Whitehall before her and the accoutrements of empire bring to her mind England's imperial past and how it gained its glory:

The accoutrements of empire. Built of course on Egyptian cotton and debt, on the wealth of India, on the sugar of the West Indies, on centuries of adventure and exploitation ending in the division of the Arabs [...]. Why then does she not find it in her heart to feel resentment or bitterness or anything but admiration for and pleasure in the beauty, the graciousness, the harmony of this scene? Is it because the action is all in the past; because this is an "empire in decline" and all the magnificence is only a—monument, rather like the great temples of Abu Simbel or Deir Bahari? Or is it because the thoughts, the words, the poetry that wound their way down the years in parallel with the fortunes of the Empire have touched her so nearly and pulled her in so close that she feels herself a part of all this? (511-512)

Asya's personal identification with England's landscape, language, culture, and literature is what gives her a sense of belonging despite the history of England's imperialism in her home country, Egypt. Asya is not naive or oblivious to this colonial history, but she personally decides to view it as part of the past and thus identifies with the aspects she admires most in England's culture and literature. Not viewing the relationship between England and Egypt on historical or political terms is a tactic Asya personally follows in order to be able to experience both places on equal

terms and thus immerse herself in an authentic hybrid experience. Soueif deals with issues of colonialism and postcolonialism in a similar manner in the rest of her fictional writings. It is through the negotiation of the paradoxes of their cross-cultural experiences, the sense of belonging to both cultures, and the refusal to allow either of the two cultures to solely define their identities that the protagonists reclaim their hybrid individuality. Soueif is concerned with writing narratives that are not overwhelmingly political but rather represent the myriad individual, personal complex identities the Arab Muslim woman could inhabit while moving between the East and West, despite the political-historical discourses that overshadow their personal narratives and their private lives.

In his book chapter, “Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity,” Amin Malak argues that Soueif’s fictional writings are “interlinked by characters, episodes, and cross-references that suggest a quasi-autobiographical slant to the narrative whose instigating impulse is to highlight the process of emotional and intellectual growth of its privileged, upper-middle-class heroines: Aisha, Asya, and Amal” (128). It is this upper-middle-class position Soueif and her protagonists inhabit that actually facilitates the crossing from one culture to another, a privilege that not all Arab women from different social classes enjoy. It is important to note that this class position they inhabit is one among the multiple dimensions that inform their complex multilayered identities and inform their cross-cultural experience. However, in his book chapter, “Ahdaf Soueif: England, Egypt, Sexual Politics,” Geoffrey Nash criticizes the autobiographical bent that influences Soueif’s writings by claiming that it reduces her ability to complicate the experience of her female characters when negotiating their space between cultures, a fact that leaves her readers and critics unsure about “how far [she] is able to extend her appraisal of cross-cultural relations beyond her own personal engagement with British and Egyptian culture” (86).

Malik points out that Soueif's female protagonists at times occupy an unapologetic elitist social class that is not sympathetic to women from other classes: in *Aisha*, the collection of short stories that is called after the main female character-narrator and protagonist, Aisha talks about herself as a "Westernized bourgeois intellectual," displaying an air of superiority due to her "acquisitions and souvenirs purchased in different cities of the world" (138). Conversely, in her novel review of Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, "A Woman Caught between Two Worlds," Leila Ahmad criticizes Soueif for the biased elitism her heroines display, especially Asya, the protagonist, who judges other female characters in Egypt based on class differences, and the different ways they perceive practicing Islam according to their class distinctions (6). Ahmad highlights the fact that Asya's preoccupation with her own struggle between her social class and the way it clashes with local Egyptian Islamic cultural manifestations in public life renders her oblivious to the struggle of other Egyptian women from lower social classes. While I agree with Ahmad's assessment that Asya's social class disconnects her from the plight of other women from lower social classes in Egyptian society, I argue that *In the Eye of the Sun* is a narrative about the individual, personal struggle Asya al-Ulama goes through on her journey towards self-discovery, while negotiating the different social and cultural spaces that also transform and change throughout her journey.

In addition, Suzan Darraj defends the apparent superficiality inherent in Asya's social class: "her existence seems terribly superficial and trite; she worries about painting her toenails and fixing her hair. However, there is much more to this protagonist—she plans to earn a PhD in English literature and to become a university professor [...]" (98). While Soueif's construction of her protagonists' lifestyle is socially elitist, it is Asya's social class that allows her the opportunity to cross from one place to another and from one culture to another, This has allowed

Asya the opportunity to explore the fruitful experiences as well as the misunderstanding and tensions that exist between the cultures she encounters, the Egyptian and English, and thus finally to construct her own hybrid identity in a space of her own imaginative creation.

### ***In the Eye of the Sun: The Mezzaterra and Asya's Budding Hybridity***

While Asya moves from Egypt to England, through Beirut, Italy, and the United States over short trips, then back to Egypt, she engages “constantly in acts of translation and self translation—what Teresa de Lauretis would call the double perspective of the semiotic subject’s representation and self-representation” (Cariello 314). Moving between these places allows her to negotiate both her self-projection and her own perception of the new places she visits and the people she encounters. The places Asya visits and lives in are not necessarily spaces that provide her with liberation from her own cultural constraints; rather, they contribute in the development and realization of her own psychological, emotional, and sexual identity. Joseph Massad describes the kind of female characters Soueif represents in her writings, Asya being one of them:

Soueif’s aim is to cut through the confusion and stereotypes of society; the dissimulation of international, national, and family politics; and the secure matrix through which life and its desires are defined. The journey of her characters is not one where liberation is the necessary telos, but rather the complex process through which the unfolding of desire(s)—sexual, social, economic, and political—is shaped by the characters themselves and all that surrounds them. (75)

In the narrative Asya is not an Arab woman suffering “gender oppression” back in Egypt, nor is she an “escapee of her intrinsically oppressive culture” seeking refuge and freedom in England (Kahf 143). On the contrary, she enjoys a great amount of freedom back in Egypt because of the upper-level social class she comes from as opposed to the escape Samman’s protagonist in *Beirut* 75 initiates because of poverty and the impoverished socio-economic class she comes from.

Also, Asya's journeys outside Egypt are either for tourism or academic purposes, privileges she enjoys because of the kind of education she receives and the social class she belongs to in Egypt. Throughout the narrative and during her geographic journey from Egypt to England, Asya will have to negotiate family, society, and sexual politics, seeking the fulfillment of her personal desires to become an individual of her own choice in both Egypt and England.

Central to the elements Asya negotiates her identity against as she moves between Egypt and England is the "encounter of East and West, of Arabic and English, and of men and women in an intercultural context" (Massad 75). Asya's cross-cultural experience starts in Egypt, even though her background, family, and the majority of her friends are Egyptian. Soueif represents Egypt of the early 1960s, in which Asya was born and raised, as a time when Egypt, Cairo specifically, was Mezzaterra, a meeting space for many traditions and cultures to intermingle in the name of modernity; English language and culture especially met and interacted with the Arab Egyptian ("Mezzaterra" 4). This near utopia, theoretical, imagined space remains the initial territory Asya inhabits in Egypt and is crucial to the initial formation of her identity before she embarked on experiencing the unfamiliar territory of England and its effect on her hybrid identity.

Having created Asya al-Ulama with an "autobiographical bent," it is not innocent that Soueif chooses to position Asya in the very same space that she grew up in, experiencing in Cairo in the 1960s (Massad 75). In an interview, Soueif admits to the affinities between herself and the character of Asya: "Her consciousness, her personality, her ambitions are all mine as I remember them at the time" (el-Jesri 2). In her book, "The Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground," Soueif describes what it was like to grow up Egyptian in the 1960s:

Growing up Egyptian in the Sixties meant growing up Muslim/Christian/Egyptian/Arab/African/Mediterranean/Non-aligned/Socialist but happy with small-scale capitalism. On top of that, if you were urban/professional the chances were that you spoke English and/or French and danced to the Stones as readily as to Abd el-Haleem. In Cairo on any one night you could go see an Arabic, English, French, Italian or Russian film. (*Mezzaterra*, 4-5)

The Mezzaterra is Asya's geographic site of departure; it is the space and place where cultures and traditions meet and interact, contributing to the initial hybrid identity Asya starts to construct in Egypt. Being raised in a territory where cross-cultural experiences and knowledge were intrinsically part of social life prepares her to have an elastic identity, one that is receptive of knowledge, culture experiences, and people when and while she moves between different cultures and geographic locations. It is from this privileged, imaginative constructed territory that Asya first experiences the world while at home, celebrating both her Egyptian Arab identity and what she has gained from interaction with Western culture.

Born into the elite class of Egyptian society, where her father is the dean at Cairo University and her mother an English professor, Asya has been brought up in Mezzaterra. Asya's parents have both lived in England for a considerable amount of time and have come back to an Egypt where the English culture and knowledge are as familiar as the Egyptian or Arabic language and its culture. In addition, Mezzaterra is the imaginary space that was inhabited by those who were similar to Asya's parents in social class and education, forming Cairo's intellectual elites in the mid 1960s. Asya is brought up in this "common ground," where cultures and traditions meet and interact, producing hybridized identities.

In Egypt, Asya is granted Western education and allowed to a certain degree a Western lifestyle, in which she loved vacationing with her parents in England, visiting the opera houses in Cairo to watch *Don Giovanni*, and to listen to the music of Puccini, Verdi, and Mozart, while also enjoying the songs of Umm Kalthoum and 'Abd El-Halim, Egyptian popular singers, during

her vacations in Alexandria. Also, she reads English and Russian literature in middle school prior to majoring in English literature at the university. Her friends, who belong to her same social class, have received the same type of upbringing, their education based on the infusion of English and Western culture, languages, and literature into their Arabic culture. Furthermore, her friends and acquaintances all speak perfect English, especially Saif Madi, whom she will fall in love with and marry, due to their common membership in the bourgeoisie. Asya and her friends highly admire English culture because it has given Egypt a secular modern façade; this is the lifestyle their parents' generation has adopted and in which they want to raise their children. Even within Egyptian society, Asya's acquaintances are from various backgrounds. There is the Greek girl from her university. Another friend's brother is in love with a Coptic girl, and his family accepts his marriage to her on the basis that the prophet Muhammad had married a Coptic woman. Still another friend's boyfriend is Palestinian, and despite her family's disapproval she will marry him later in the narrative. This background prepares her to deal with difference in a positive manner; she acts upon a sense of affinity and identification with the different cultures and people she interacts with and meets.

Furthermore, Soueif closely relates Egyptian politics to politics in both the Arab world and the West, an attempt to reflect the growing political antagonism of the domestic, national, and international politics prior to Asya leaving Egypt, which highlights the deteriorating state of the Mezzaterra, the space that Asya will no longer find upon her return to Egypt after five years of absence. Asya witnesses the decline of the Nasserite era and the decline of the concept of pan-Arabism, which was inclusive of all Arabs of different racial, social, and national backgrounds. Also, the decline of stable relationships between Egypt and the West, especially after the 1967 war, and the rise of Islamism that becomes publically inimical to the West—a fact that directly



contributes to the decline of this “common ground” Asya once enjoyed. Also, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is one of the major factors that gives rise to a growing public inimical attitude toward the West. It is important to note that Soueif narrates these political developments as a background to the development of Asya’s personal life to reflect the way Asya will have to deal with the effect politics has on the social values she was brought up with. At a certain point, Asya will have to negotiate her hybridized identity, which has become strongly grounded in England, with the new Egypt she returns to live in.

To a certain degree, Mezzaterra is a space that can be seen as parallel to the concept of the “third space” postcolonial subjects can possibly inhabit upon encountering the culture of their colonizers. This space remains “in-between the designations of identity,” where “this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 4). The basic characteristic of Soueif’s Mezzaterra, which Asya inhabits among the elites in Egyptian society, is that it does not allow cultural dominance of any sort but rather opens up the opportunity for a free exchange of traditions and knowledge. However, it is important to note that Mezzaterra is not only a space to celebrate naively the exchange of traditions, culture, and knowledge between Egypt and the West, disregarding power and political relations between the two territories. Asya’s mother, who is considered part of the generation that helped ground the mezzaterra in Cairo while fighting British imperialism, has studied English literature despite her “rejection of British imperialism” (*Mezzaterra* 6). Just like other members of her generation in the 1950s, Asya’s mother believed that the only way to fully appreciate English literature was when political dominance was diminished, which would allow a level of trust between the culture and

the people of those territories so that they could engage in unbiased consumption of the literary production on common grounds (6).

It is Mezzaterra of Asya's social class in Egypt that provides the stepping stone for Asya's identity formation. Instead of Asya privileging one side of her identity, she negotiates the construction of a unique hybrid self. Interestingly, even when Asya moves away from Egypt, the way she receives her new experiences in the West is negotiated through the hybridized subjectivity she already possesses. Asya does not experience England, Italy, or the United States as foreign spaces that alienate her rather, she negotiates the myriad opportunities these spaces offer her, engaging in a constant act of self construction and reconstruction of identity. In his article, "The Anglo-Arab Encounter," Edward Said hails the successful way Soueif manages to represent Asya's hybrid experience:

Soueif does not in the end fall for the East versus West, or Arab versus European, formulas. Instead, she works them out patiently, and then goes with Asya, who is neither fully one thing nor another, at least so far as ideologies of that sort are concerned. Soueif renders the experience of crossing over from one side to the other, and then back again, indefinitely, without rancor or preachiness. Because Asya is so securely Arab and Muslim, she does not need to make an issue of it. The fine thing, though, is that Soueif can present such a hegira as Asya's in English, thereby showing that what has become almost formulaic to the Arab (as well as Western) discourse of the Other need not always be the case. In fact, there can be generosity, and vision, and overcoming barriers, and, finally, human existential integrity. (Said 410)

Soueif explores the identity of Asya not as a binary construction in which there remains a clear divide between her East and West experience. Rather, it is Asya's hybrid experience that pushes her into pursuing her individual need to construct a subjectivity she feels most comfortable and satisfied with. Throughout the narrative, Asya does not privilege one particular social experience over the other nor does she get overburdened by the imbalance of the historical and political relationship between England and Egypt. On the contrary, if anything, Asya's experience in both

Egypt and the West involves paradoxes that she does not necessarily attempt to resolve, but rather embodies, engages, and negotiates as part of her identity formation and growing maturity. The existence of these paradoxes in Asya's identity affirms her affiliation to both cultures she experiences: she "reads the 'West' from an 'Eastern' perspective and she sees the East through 'Western' eyes," attempting to incorporate those paradoxes as part of her identity (Malak 132). Asya's resolution regarding her authentic existence as a complex hybrid will affirm the words of her literature teacher at Cairo University, who explains the function of employing a paradox as a figure of speech: "The paradox is sometimes the only way to express the truth" (Soueif 109). Thus, when Asya decides at the end of the narrative to return to Egypt, she embraces the paradoxes of her experience in both places and affirms her connection to her identity as both Arab Egyptian and English, accepting her hybridized multilayered experiences that are intrinsic parts of her subjectivity.

The Mezzaterra Soueif sets Asya's initial experience in is a space that allows the flourishing of a hybridized identity, where Soueif maintains that "as the Eighties rolled into the Nineties the political direction the world was taking seemed to undermine every aspect of this identity" (8). Soueif then suggests that writing about Mezzaterra and the hybridized spaces of interaction between the East and the West should be promoted in order to restore a potential for an open dialogue that has been undermined by the unbalanced political order of the present. Thus, as a writer promoting the common ground of cultural interaction and the representation of hybridized identities, *In the Eye of the Sun* could be read as an exercise of writing back to those who undermine such hybridized experience or misrepresent it. Similar to Soueif's writing about the importance of representing this hybridized space in literature, Bhabha also encouraged literary representation of this hybridized space, an attempt to open "the way to conceptualizing

an international culture, based on the inscription and articulation of a culture's hybridity" (312). In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha explains what the third space can offer a hybridized identity: "For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges; rather, hybridity to me is the 'Third Space,' which enables other positions to emerge" (211). The "third space" is "interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative" (3). It is the imaginative space that is in a constant state of articulation, which due to its unfixed nature blurs the limitations of existing boundaries and calls into question established categories of culture and identity. Also, according to Bhabha, this "third space" is an *ambivalent* site where cultural meaning and representation have no "primordial unity or fixity" (3). Therefore, the third space leads not only to hybrid cultures, but also to hybrid identities. In addition, "the third space may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (4).

Significantly, prior to Asya's travel to Europe, the Mezzaterra she socially and culturally belonged to offered her a third space within her own homeland, one in which she starts to conceive herself as a hybrid identity. Furthermore, upon her movement and journeys, this experience in Mezzaterra is enhanced; Asya's encounter with other geographic locations only enriches her multilayered identity, which has no "primordial unity or fixity" (4), constantly shifting, transforming, and redefining itself according to her cross-cultural experiences.

In addition, part of Soueif's representation of the personal emotional, intellectual, and sexual growth Asya goes through as an Arab woman, traditionally Muslim yet secular in worldview, can be considered another way of writing back to the misrepresentation of the Arab

Muslim woman in literary works and discourse. Asya, a privileged, upper-class, Western-educated Egyptian woman, does not conform to the stereotypical image of the Arab Muslim woman in literary discourse. It has been true that the majority of works published in the West representing the experience of the Arab woman have traditionally focused on highlighting three particular stereotypical representations: “She is a victim of gender oppression; the second portrays her as an escapee of her intrinsically oppressive culture; and the third represents her as the pawn of Arab male power” (Kahf 149).

In her article, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Chandra Mohanty criticizes Western feminist discourse on women in the so-called Third World, specifically their reductionist and stereotypical representations of the experience of Arab women and other women who are considered part of the category “Third World Women,” whom it represents as a “homogeneous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit *victims* of particular socio-economic system” (38). She also emphasizes that treating women in the Third World as a homogeneous category “appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks. In doing so it ultimately robs them of their historical and political agency” (39).

Even though Asya is an Arab woman, she defies the stereotypes attached to this identity and the stereotypical representation of the experience of the Arab Muslim. In this sense, Soueif represents Asya as a privileged, upper-class, hybrid character, both Arab Egyptian racially and Western intellectually, engaged in a constant state of negotiation between her Egyptian and Western experiences, defying any fixed notion of her hybridized identity. The fact that Asya is a complex hybrid character defies any attempt to be categorized by any homogeneous group or fixed definition.

When asked in an interview about Asya's identity as an Egyptian woman, Soueif affirms:

Yes she is [Egyptian], in the sense that I am Egyptian. There are so many hybrids now, people who are a little bit of this and a little bit of that. The interesting thing is what we make of it, what kind of hybrid we become and how we feel about it. (Soueif qtd. in Malak 133)

Asya from the start was intended to represent the experience of a woman who is Arab Egyptian racially, Muslim by tradition, and English through education and experience. These elements that form her identity mark her as a hybrid, whose ongoing cross-cultural experiences are constantly negotiated through both her Arab and English identities. Soueif purposefully focuses on Asya's hybridity, which mirrors her own experience. Edward Said describes the way Soueif represents hybridity in the text as an authentic identity since she is able to write "of both England and Egypt from within, although for her heroine Asya Ulama Egypt is the land of her birth, religion, and early education, Britain the land of her post-graduate education, maturity, and intimate expression" (407). This dialectic informs the whole novel, where Asya till the end will demonstrate "ambivalent affiliations to Arab-Muslim cultural ethos on the one hand and to acquired European intellectualism on the other" (Malak 132). Upon her final return to Egypt, where she acquires a job as a university professor, Asya continues to express herself as a hybridized Egyptian woman, since she will never be able to "undo what the North has done" (Soueif qtd. in Malak 132). Moreover, Said considers Ahdaf's use of the English language instead of Arabic to represent her narrative as a natural choice, since "English serves better when a lot of the material is, so to speak, English, about being in England, having to do intimately with English people and so on" (407). Nevertheless, Said affirms that *In the Eye of the Sun* is an Arabic novel written in English: Asya's sensibility remains Egyptian even when and as she closely identifies with the English side of her character (407).

In *In the Eye of the Sun*, hybridity becomes a growing trope the narrative is centered on. Soueif creates a text that is both Egyptian and English: the cartography of the novel stretches from Egypt to England when Asya moves to England to complete her graduate studies. It is through the journeys Asya initiates that her hybridized multilayered identity comes into full play, where the duality of her Egyptian-English identity remains finally grounded in her mediation and negotiation of the spaces she occupies at different stages of her life. Her connection to place and to a geographic location is rooted in her hybridized sense of place, and thus whether located in England or in Egypt, Asya demonstrates an ambivalent affiliation to place if and once cultural hybridity is absent from her life. Even toward the end of the narrative, in the epilogue, when she returns to Egypt and is touring a rural area in a suburb in Cairo, Asya feels displaced and dislocated as she does not feel that she can fully enact upon her hybridized sense of identity due to the fact that she feels that the Mezzaterra culture and social space she left behind was disappearing from the Egyptian public life she returns to.

### **Hybrid Spaces, Agency, and Identity Formation and Transformation**

Toward the end of the novel, Asya travels back from England, where she has acquired her PhD, to Egypt, where she has recently accepted a job as an English professor at Cairo University. The Egypt Asya returns to is one that she cannot fully connect with; both it and she have changed significantly during her absence and dislocation in England, and she feels even further dislocated and displaced on her return. While teaching at the University of Cairo, Asya notices how the social life has changed, especially that of the women attending Cairo University. Teaching a class where the majority of her students are female, Asya is surprised to notice a radically different female student body than the one that attended the university while she was an

undergraduate student. In the post-Nasser era and upon the rise of Islamism in public life, Asya is warned by her sister prior to teaching her first literature class at the university that there will be change, especially with a great number of female students wearing the *hijab*, a scene that was not common at the university in the mid-1960s when she was a student. Prior to lecturing on the first day of classes, Asya asks her students to write on a piece of paper why they are in a class studying English Literature. One of the responses she gets is, “I want to learn the language of my enemy” (754). Surprised by such an answer and in an attempt to engage a dialogue, Asya asks the veiled girl who identifies the response as hers why she did not think “there was a commonality of human experience beyond politics, beyond forms” (754). The girl refuses to answer, leaving Asya confused. After this confrontation, Asya links the student’s anti-Western sentiments and her religious practice of wearing the veil to the post-Nasser era that has started to witness the emergence of Islamists in the public sphere.

Asya’s confusion regarding the girl’s response is directly linked to the social class she belongs to: her family never practiced Islam as a faith. Also, Asya’s affiliation with English and English literature stems from her upbringing in a Western-educated family in which her mother and she have made a conscious decision to be educated in English and specialize in its literature. Asya fails to see that the student’s response is linked to a postcolonial discourse that she is not consciously aware of, since she and her family belong to a social class that has been “a replacement of the British,” as indicated by “the decision of Asya and her mother, Lateefa, to speak English instead of Arabic” (Nash 72).

Nash critiques Asya’s reaction to the rise of Islamism among female students at the university, claiming that Asya does not understand that the veiled girl identifies more with Islam than with Western education because she belongs to a different social class from Asya’s. Also,



Leila Ahmad criticizes the confrontation Soueif creates between Asya and her female student as one in which Asya's social elitism prevents her from fully understanding the motivation behind her student's outward display of religiosity and her inimical attitude towards the West. Ahmad criticizes Asya during this encounter on account of her privileged class position saying:

Asya, in a confrontation with veiled university students, is enraged (much as a Western woman might be) by their veils and their attitudes toward Islam. Asya is of middle-class background; the Islam of the middle and upper class, an urbane, cosmopolitan, secular or near-secular Islam, is of course not the only Islam there is. Moreover, it is an Islam that differs from the Islamic habits and attitudes of other classes. While it is entirely appropriate for the middle-class heroine to direct a hostile and Western-like gaze toward the habits, attitudes and political perspectives of other classes, it might have been more satisfying if the author, as distinct from the heroine, had shown some awareness of Asya's class biases. (6)

Ahmad's general assessment is true: Asya judges her female students' choice to wear the veil and their attitude toward the West based on her own class biases and her own personal experience with the West. In addition, for Asya, the confrontation with these female students is an unfortunate occurrence, since their convictions conflict directly with the type of hybridity she adopts, one that is acceptant of others, "beyond politics, beyond forms" (Soueif 754). Nash highlights that Soueif fails to engage Asya's lack of awareness of her own class biases when judging her female students due to "Soueif's closeness to Asya and her failure to detach herself from Asya's elitism" (68). Soueif with this episode tries to emphasize Asya's identity construction as a hybrid humanist Anglo-Arab, traditionally Muslim, secular in worldview, who experiences the West as an elite, hybrid, cosmopolitan character, not necessarily as a postcolonial subject acutely aware of unbalanced power relations between the East and West. Furthermore, Asya stresses the common ground between the two cultures she experiences, claiming "for the two cultures an equal weighing" (74).

As Asya feels out of place, dislocated in the Egypt she returns to, she goes through moments of contemplative reflections over her life:

Home. [...] How can one keep up with it all. It is like—like—Asya closes her eyes as she tries to concentrate, to capture the thought. It is as though the brain were a split screen, one half examining a frozen frame, a moment where time has stopped, the other vaguely registering the continuation of the action; storing up the passing frames for closer inspection later. (763)

This splitting of Asya's consciousness in order to make sense of her past, present, and future is an act that mirrors the splitting of her hybrid sense of identity, where it is difficult for her to restore the same sense of home that she left and reconcile its image with the experiences she has gained away from home. Yet, this splitting consciousness and the moving back and forth between past, present, and future is necessary for Asya so that she can better understand the "third space" that she will continue to occupy, a place that defies any notion of a fixed identity. In the Egypt she returns to, Asya's identity represents the concept of what Bhabha calls "the beyond":

'Beyond' signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary—the very act of going *beyond*—are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the 'present' which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced. The imaginary of spatial distance—to live somehow beyond the border of our times—throws into relief the temporal, social differences that interrupt our collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity. The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities. Unlike the dead hand of history that tells the beads of sequential time like a rosary, seeking to establish serial, causal connections, we are now confronted with what Walter Benjamin describes as the blasting of a monadic moment from the homogenous course of history, 'establishing a conception of the present as the "time of the now."' (4)

Asya recognizes that she occupies the borderline of her own culture, representing the beyond, where her identity has come to occupy a place not defined by spatial or temporal settings.

Throughout her experiences in the different temporal and spatial settings she inhabits, Asya's

sense of identity has been constructed by her experience of place and the way she translates herself into those places. During this return to Egypt and upon her witnessing the rise of cultural Islamism, Asya displays an ambivalent sense of connection to the atmosphere at the University of Cairo. Even though Islam was a traditional part of Egypt before she left, Asya's lack of affiliation with it upon her return marks her hybrid self; it presents her as displaced, conflicting with elements within her own culture, establishing her individual, personalized character.

The sense of ambivalence, displacement, and dislocation that Asya struggles with once back in Egypt is highlighted at the end of the narrative when she comes upon an archeological site in which a statue of a Pharaonic woman has been revealed. According to the guard at the site, the statue of the woman appeared suddenly upon excavations taking place on the site. This statue might have been of a "dancing girl whom Ramses took fancy to and elevated to a Sister-Wife" (Soueif 785). The guard's inability to specifically identify who this statue exactly was of does not irritate Asya, who guesses, on the basis of the composure of the woman's face, that "her smile tells of someone who had always known who she was," even if others cannot define her (786). It is Asya's contemplation of this statue and its features that gives her the feeling that this woman has found her own place in the exact location she was found: "She has indeed found a gentle grave; for here she is, delivered back into the sunlight still in complete possession of herself—of her pride, and of her small, subtle smile" (785). Just like this woman, Asya will have to continue to find her own "in-between" place in which to emerge in full embodiment of her hybrid experience.

The movement and transportation this statue goes through across different settings, being dislocated in a spatial-temporal site, does mark her as different. Yet she has found her own place: her travel across time has landed her exactly in a place she belongs to and where she remains "in

complete possession of herself,” despite not belonging to the site she appears at in the modern days. Just like this Pharaonic woman who is out of place, yet defines a place of belonging for herself, Asya has to learn how to insert her hybrid identity into present-day Egypt, marking a personal geography that she belongs to regardless of the society surrounding her. From the beginning of the narrative and even within the boundaries of Egypt, prior to her journeys and cross-cultural experiences, Asya senses dislocation and displacement because she feels that she belongs to a different time than the present one she experiences. Yet Asya will have to negotiate the spatial and temporal settings she occupies at every stage of her life to get to a place where she is the only one who can carve her own individual, personal identity and construct it in the theoretical imaginary “in-between” space she claims as her own.

The theme of hybridity underlies Asya’s life narrative: where she struggles to construct her own hybrid identity while navigating between the competing cultures and spaces she inhabits and encounters, mainly Egypt and England. While moving between these two places, Asya realizes that in order to control the trajectory of her identity formation and to reclaim herself as a hybrid subject, she will have to address the postcolonial predicament; this entails confronting traditional Egyptian family authority, male authority, sexual politics, and both Arab traditional and Western Orientalist stereotyping of the Arab women’s identity. While moving between East and West, navigating the tensions that arise in this cross-cultural experience, Asya will reconstruct her personal hybridized identity and the in-between space that she shapes out of her experience of the places she visits.

Despite being socio-economically privileged, Asya’s personal life is defined and controlled by the people in it and the places she encounters. In order to be able to experience these places and spaces she inhabits on her own terms, Asya has to learn how to negotiate

between what is expected of her by the people surrounding her and the choices she will finally make on her own, reclaiming agency to define her own life.

From the start, Asya's life route is defined by the choices her academic parents make for her. Even though Asya likes literature, it seems that her choice of pursuing a graduate degree in it to become a professor of literature, just like her parents, is hardly a choice she makes on her own. After completing her PhD in England, having worked on her dissertation for a long time, Asya informs her mother Lateefa that she does not want to go back to Egypt right away. Lateefa, not understanding Asya's desire for some "time on her own," is disappointed with Asya's decision. It seems that Lateefa refuses to comprehend that her daughter has the right to make her own decisions that do not align with her own. The following conversation between Asya and her mother reveals the extent to which Lateefa is totally oblivious to Asya's need of making her own decisions:

"I've never ever made a real choice."

"All the choices you made were yours."

"Yes, but were they *real* choices? I mean, I was born into a road which had 'to the Ph.D.' signaled on it; I hardly knew anyone who didn't work in the university—I mean, I don't even know that I want to be in the university for the rest of my life."

"But what else can you do?" Lateefa stares at her daughter.

"I don't know. But maybe I can find out."

[...]

"But you can't just sit around doing nothing."

[...]

"Oh *Mummy*," Asya cries jumping up. "You're going round and round in circles." She stands in the middle of the room. "I've done what I've been *conditioned* to want. I've woken up every morning and done what I already *knew* I had to do. I want to know what I would do if I didn't *have* to do *anything*." (689-690)

Through the use of certain words like "real," "choice," and "conditioned," when discussing the way her life has unfolded with her mother, Asya stresses that her life choices were not really her own, but rather they were ones pre-arranged by her family and the social class she was born into,

and thus she had to assume the prescribed role. The lack of agency in choosing what she personally wants prevents Asya from being able to fully define her identity and subjectivity.

Also, when Asya suffers from an unfulfilling, unconsummated marriage, she will blame her parents, who insisted that the marriage be postponed for three years, long after the start of their romantic relationship. Asya also blames her social class and the traditional culture in Egypt that demands that romantic relationship not be consummated until marriage. Agency in acting upon her desires and her life choices is one that Asya gradually will learn how to obtain as she learns how to give voice to herself and to her identity.

It is no surprise that Asya usually turns to reading novels like *Madame Bovary*, *Middlemarch*, and *Anna Karenina* when she feels weak, an attempt to connect to the plights of other female protagonists trying to reclaim unique voices of their own. These novels become spaces that satisfy Asya's hybrid cultural sensibility, since she does not necessarily see any difference between herself as an Egyptian woman and the Western heroines in the novels she reads. In addition, the choice of connecting to the plight of Western heroines highlights Asya's identity as a natural hybrid, where her hybrid education and lifestyle makes it natural for her to search for an agency within the universal experience of other women. Just like the protagonists in the novels she reads and the Pharaonic woman Asya encounters upon her return to Egypt, Asya will have to negotiate her life circumstances, the people around her, and the dominant discourses that define her identity in both Egypt and in England in order to become "in complete possession of herself" (785).

From the start, what attracted Asya to Saif Madi, the man she falls in love with, marries, then divorces, is his hybridized manners: he is Western in clothes, manners, and political views; he looked "completely different from everybody else" (98). His perfect English also allures

Asya, but what she is not aware of from the start is that Saif will become another person, back in Egypt, who will silence her and hinder her from emerging as an individual in complete possession of herself. The relationship between Asya and Saif from the start is one defined by Asya's lack of agency to fully communicate herself and her desires to him, allowing him to indirectly control her identity. Her development as an independent individual later will start taking place as she physically moves away from him. Yet, Asya for a long time willingly accepts that Saif exercise his authority over her by silencing her voice at times and refusing to fulfill her sexual desires out of a sense of authority.

Saif lies to Asya on several occasions, but Asya accepts these lies without challenging them out of a sense of weakness. She later regrets this passivity as she learns that challenging Saif was one of the major achievements prerequisite to her emergence as an independent individual. When Saif describes his lifestyle and mother to Asya, he gives her a sense that his mother is a modern woman with a trendy hairstyle, just like her own, who lives a certain Western lifestyle. Upon visiting Saif's home in a rural part of Egypt not far from Cairo, Asya is shocked to discover that his mother looks totally opposite to what he has described. Asya, who is annoyed by Saif's lie, does not challenge him, even as she is certain he knows that she is aware that he has lied to her. Asya's silence allows Saif to further exploit her by uttering more lies, expecting her to leave his authority unchallenged.

Saif also unashamedly lies to Asya when he tells his British friends, Nicola and Leon, a twisted story about how he and Asya met and fell in love. While Asya and Saif first meet at Cairo University, where they are instantly attracted to one another, Saif relates a story of how he meets Asya after she is wounded during a demonstration they are both participating in against the Egyptian government. While Nicola exclaims that she thinks Asya's too brave to go out on a

demonstration, whereas Nicola would be terrified by the thought of being in Asya's shoes, Asya goes along with the lie in a "voice sounding artificial and strained" (186). Internally, Asya is confused by the lie Saif tells, since she actually has never been allowed to participate in any of the recent demonstrations taking place in the streets of Cairo because her parents and Saif together disapprove of them, claiming that they are "absurd, pointless, [and ...] change nothing" (187). Despite her awareness of Saif's lies, Asya is not able to "ask him afterwards" when they are both together alone and question his retelling of the story of their meeting (187). By not challenging Saif's lies, Asya accepts that her story about their meeting be silenced. Moreover, Asya's lack of voice and agency to talk for herself prevents her from emerging and connecting to an identity that she is in full control of. Asya will have to go through a process whereby she gains agency to speak for herself, control her life, and define her own sense of identity and place in a world of her own construction.

Conversely, Saif controls Asya's expression of her emotions and sexual intimacy in an attempt to demonstrate his authority over her. During their engagement, Asya offers herself several times to Saif but he refuses to consummate their relationship, claiming that social and traditional codes require an unmarried woman to remain a virgin. Yet, after their marriage, Saif will continue to refuse to consummate their marriage, leaving Asya in a state of confusion. The following scene is typical of probably every scene in which Asya and Saif are intimate. It highlights Asya's lack of agency even when it comes to acting upon her sexual desires with Saif after their marriage. While they are in bed, Asya offers herself to him:

"Darling," she whispers, "darling, you know—if you want—it's really alright. I'm not afraid or anything."

He lifts his head. "What are you talking about Princess?"

"If you want to, you know, make love properly"— she moves still closer to him—"then that's alright. I love you."

"I love you too, Princess."



“Well?”  
“No—no.” He looks into her eyes. “It wouldn’t be a good idea.”  
“Oh! Well, OK.”  
[...].  
“Hush,” he bends his head and kisses her. (139)

This scene takes place in Beirut, Lebanon, after both Saif and Asya decide to meet secretly away from Egypt. Both Asya and Saif have decided that they will consummate their relationship in Beirut, yet Saif decides to hold back because he thinks “it wouldn’t be a good idea” and out of an assumed position of offering protection to Asya. Yet, Asya offers herself explicitly while Saif interrupts her, and she’s left without being able to express herself fully. Saif’s refusal to have intercourse with Asya in this scene will be replicated even after their marriage in other places they visit and while they’re in Egypt and in England, leaving Asya’s desires unfulfilled. Asya, who refrains from expressing her lack of sexual satisfaction to Saif every time they are intimate, will later engage in an affair with an Englishman after moving to England to pursue her PhD. He will satisfy her sexually for a short time, yet leave her emotionally empty. It is important to note that Asya’s affair with the Englishman, Gerald Stone, is not one she seeks to be liberated sexually from cultural constraints in Egypt; rather, Asya searches for the emotional and sexual satisfaction that Saif does not provide her; she finds it in her relationship with Gerald.

However, the affair ends when Asya discovers that Gerald Stone is obsessed with her body out of an Orientalist fixation: he enjoys fetishizing the sexuality and bodies of Third World women. Even though Asya will regret this relationship, it will become one of the learning experiences that her hybridized identity negotiates and confronts as she translates herself into the English landscape.

Nash offers a flawed reading of Asya’s sexuality and its relationship to her cultural background:

Although she is a Muslim, Asya's privileged background enables her to indulge in sexual experimentation covertly in her own land, and more freely in Switzerland, where she travels as a student, and in Beirut, Damascus and London, in the company of her fiancé, Saif. Asya's premarital intimacy with Saif stops short of complete sexual congress, and once the pair have accomplished the traditional marriage ritual, they find themselves unable to consummate their union, even though Saif is neither impotent, nor Asya frigid. From Asya's point of view, her relationship with Saif (who is unable to accept her on her own terms) seems to represent the limitations of her cultural inheritance, and the need to go beyond this finds expression in her search for emotional and sexual fulfillment with European men. (70)

Nash misreads Asya's unfulfilling sexual experimentation with Saif in Egypt and her search for fulfillment with an Englishman as a representation of the "limitations of her cultural inheritance," as opposed to the sexual liberation England will offer her. However, from the very start of her sexual experimentation, Asya's body has sexual and emotional desires that are not satisfied in her relationship with her husband. She has an affair with Gerald Stone not because England is a place of sexual liberation for her, but rather simply because she finds fulfillment in her affair with Gerald, despite his nationality. Nash's insistence on reading Asya's sexual quest as one in which she associates sexual repression with Egypt and sexual liberation with England is a misreading of her hybridized identity. In fact, Asya translates herself emotionally and sexually with Gerald in order to speak her desires and express herself, something she is not able to do with Saif. Engaging in the affair is an attempt by Asya to reclaim an agency and a voice with which she is able to express her desires and have them fulfilled. In fact, as her relationship with Gerald starts, Asya uses the physical fulfillment it offers her to rationalize it:

Why not? Why not "baby" and "babe" and "honey" and "sugar"? Why should she always be "sweetie" and "princess," and never this, never be kissed and caressed and undressed and looked at and admired? (539)

As opposed to the type of unfulfilling sexual relationship Asya has with Saif, this affair she enters with Gerald provides her with both emotional and sexual satisfaction:

And what am *I* doing? Why am *I* in this? I'm in this because I wanted him to stay one night. And because he made me feel physical again. And because it was a complete novelty to be with a man who wanted to talk and who—I thought—wanted to listen; someone who actually made demands on me—and not just that I should leave him alone. Someone who actually wanted me—*needed* to make love to me. (592)

It is the lack of emotional and sexual fulfillment with Saif that drives Asya to engage in this affair with Gerald Stone. Saif never considers Asya's emotions and needs, and thus she decides to find this fulfillment elsewhere.

After Asya engages in the affair with Gerald, she discovers that she has become an Orientalist fantasy for him. At a certain point, Asya will disengage from Gerald, refusing to have her agency reduced to an Orientalist stereotype.

“Could we—please—at least switch off the light?” she says. “No.” He shakes his head. He pulls her head round by the hair and holds it so that she has to look into the mirror. “Look at you. I never want you to get dressed when we're married. Be like this for me, babe: naked and perfumed, your hair falling over your shoulders, wearing only your jewels—”

[...]

“An odalisque you want?” she smiles.

“A what?”

“A concubine. A female slave.”

[...]

“I'm the one who's the slave, *your* slave, my beautiful, beautiful Eastern butterfly.” (563)

Asya realizes that Gerald's relationship with her comes out of his obsession and Orientalist fixation on the figure of the exotic, sexual, Arab woman. This fantasy is one that Asya will have to confront as Gerald's fantasy becomes an obsession. The Orientalist trope that Soueif brings into the narrative while Asya is in England is part of the wider Orientalist-Western discourse that Asya has to engage, negotiate, and finally deconstruct in order to reclaim a hybridized identity defined by her own translation of self into place. It is imperative to note that part of Asya's cross-cultural, Anglo-Arab encounter that grounds her hybrid subjectivity is that she is put in

trials where she will have to navigate her identity away from discourses that reduce her agency and subjectivity to a stereotype.

Finally, when Asya is fed up with Gerald's reductionist fantasies of her identity, she confronts him in an attempt to deconstruct his Western gaze towards her and all the other Third World women he has dated:

"Gerald," Asya says quietly, "why have all your girl-friends been from 'developing' countries?"

"What?"

"You've never had a white girl-friend, why?"

"I don't think that way, man."

"Yes, you do—and the reason you've gone for Trinidad—Vietnam—Egypt—is so you can feel superior. You can be the big white boss—you are a sexual imperialist— [...] You've pushed me and pushed me and pushed me and *pushed* me and I've had it. I hate it. I hate people who go around trying to change people. The hypocrisy of it. [...] I know you better than you know yourself— [...] *shit*—what you mean is that the way you think I *should* be is better for *you* than the way I *am*. Well, I've had it—" (723)

While this argument between Asya and Gerald reveals how aware Asya becomes of her subject position, she will no longer accept under any circumstance to be defined by Gerald according to his narrow Orientalist assumptions. It also marks an important moment in her reclamation of her own identity, refusing any external, fixed notions and misconceptions of who she is. Asya totally rejects the way Gerald and even the wider Western Orientalist discourses construct her image, which is an important step she takes towards emerging as a hybrid identity of her own construction. It is upon her return to Egypt that the novel marks a full cycle, where Asya learns how to reclaim a voice, an authority over her own life, and an identity that embraces the paradoxes of a hybrid experience.

Throughout the narrative, Soueif plunges Asya into experiences where she has to stand for herself, voice her desires, and reject being manipulated by the people in her life, whether her mother, Saif, or Gerald, all of whom assume authoritative voices over her own. Also, Asya faces

dominant stereotypical discourses that define her identity in both England and Egypt, which she does not succumb to but rather refutes and deconstructs in order to construct her own hybrid identity. Asya's ability to speak out of the position of her hybrid experiences frees her from the authoritative control of any person, any discourse, or any place over her identity. Thus, Asya's journeys to reclaim her voice, satisfy her personal desires, and claim a hybrid identity of her own construction is one that is not limited to a certain space that will either oppress her or liberate her. Throughout her physical journey from Egypt to England, then back to Egypt once more, Asya will continue to learn and develop as a hybrid Anglo-Arab woman who frees herself from people, places, and discourses that attempt to limit her agency in determining her own personal identity. Asya's final encounter with the lone statue of the Pharaonic woman who has gone through a temporal journey from the era of Ramses II to modern-day Egypt teaches her how to define a space that encompasses her hybrid identity. Despite her temporal dislocation, this lonely woman statue appears "in complete possession of herself," which makes Asya realize that reclaiming her agency and sense of authority over her own body, destiny, and hybrid identity becomes the only way to be in "complete possession of herself"; she gains this personal authority through the trials of her physical, psychological, and emotional journeys.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Personal Reconstructive Journey Narrative: Displacement, Religion, and Worldview in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*

#### Introduction

In her two novels, *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2006), Leila Aboulela uses the trope of journey, both spiritual and physical, to trace the process of identity transformation her Sudanese female protagonists, Sammar and Najwa, go through while (dis)placed in the West, London and Scotland, respectively. These female characters are both represented in a way that their Islamic religious and spiritual identity is (re)constructed upon experiencing cross-cultural encounters and conflicts, where the host lands become the sites of their individual and Islamic spiritual awakening. Constructing London and Scotland as contact zones in which an Islamic identity becomes more grounded for these female protagonists is significant because it allows them to personally and independently negotiate their own ways of experiencing the West, their Islamic faith, and their gendered identities. Through close analytical reading of the two novels, this chapter focuses on how the journeys (back and forth between Sudan and Europe) undertaken by the female protagonists allow identity negotiation, cultural translation, and spiritual (re)construction upon geographies that are originally considered diasporic sites of displacement for the protagonists.

Analyzing the novels according to cooke's concept of the "Muslimwoman"—the idea in the post-9/11 era, especially in the West, that faith and gender are the most salient features of the Muslim woman's identity—I argue that Aboulela's female protagonists challenge any essentialist and reductionist labeling of their characters, even when they finally assume a gendered, Islamic faith-based identity. Both Sammar and Najwa represent and refute the concept

of the Muslimwoman: they derive agency from their journeys and their experiences—which are cross-cultural and diverse, yet individual and nuanced—without having totally to assimilate to and be consumed by either Western culture, through adopting a secular worldview, nor by Sudanese Islamic traditional culture. “Instead of having Islam as part of the culture, I am consciously presenting it as a faith” (Aboulela qtd. Chambers 94). Thus Sammar and Najwa experience their religious identity as part of their gendered cross-cultural experience as women in Scotland and London, where they constantly negotiate between a secular worldview and an Islamic one based on an increasing sense of faith. Moreover, Aboulela’s novels are part of a body of literature by and about Arab women that is concerned with balancing the representation of Arab Muslim women’s experiences and claims for their individual personal identities.

### **The Muslim Woman in Aboulela’s Novels**

In her article, “The Muslimwoman,” miriam cooke coins the term Muslimwoman by combining two aspects of identity, religion and gender, components which have been the highlights of the Muslim woman’s identity to both neo-orientalist and Muslim fundamentalists in a post-11/9 era. cooke describes how and why she came up with the label Muslimwoman:

In the 6 years that have elapsed since the events of 9/11 Muslims have become the Other and veiled Muslim women have become their visible representatives. Standing in for their communities, they have attracted international media attention. So intertwined are gender and religion that they have become one. I have coined the term the Muslimwoman to describe this erasure of diversity. Some women reject this label. Others use it to empower themselves and even to subvert the identification. In the process they are constructing a new kind of cosmopolitanism. (139)

cooke argues that Muslimwoman is an essentializing identity that erases diversity and difference among Muslim women, an identity that has been ascribed to them whether they accept it, challenge it, or refuse it all together: “The Muslimwoman is both a noun and an adjective that

refers to an imposed identification the individual may or may not choose for herself. The Muslimwoman is not a description of a reality; it is the ascription of a label that reduces all diversity to a single image” (Cooke 140). Because the term Muslimwoman is a label ascribed to a group of women who have not chosen to be reduced to a gendered and religious identity, Muslim women find themselves navigating this fused identity and often rejecting it, even when participating in the growing debate about the Muslim woman. Thus, Muslim women writers, just like Muslim women operating in other fields of discourse and representation, have found themselves challenging this identity marker while sometimes representing it in their literary writings in a way that allows them to refute its legitimacy, challenging the orientalist, neo-orientalist, and radical Islamic discourses, all of which historically participated in validating this construction about Muslim women. And because the label Muslimwoman is not a description of the reality of the identity of Muslim women, but rather an imposed identity, it is important to note that addressing this limited identification does not reduce the agency of Muslim women writers or their literary representations. At times, when treating literary representation of the Muslimwoman, more Muslim women are presenting it as a site of empowerment against neo-colonial powers and patriarchal Islamic authoritative powers, both of which have been the main players in creating this identity and the meanings attached to it. The label Muslimwoman becomes a site where Muslim women can speak out, refuse, and challenge any imposed representation of what constitutes their identities (Badran 102). Thus, as varied and individualistic as they are, Muslim women writers in the varied fields of representation are aware of how to position themselves and their literary writings when engaging the Muslimwoman identity in their writings.



In literary representation, Muslim women writers have created empowered female characters who have engaged this label in varied ways to represent the experience of the Muslim woman; characters loaded with conflicts and nuanced complexities that are connected directly to their Arab-Islamic religious and gendered experiences. While Ahdaf Soueif's works have Arab Muslim women characters in her novels, she undermines the Muslim identification of her characters who don't define themselves within the limiting boundaries of this identification; yet, Leila Aboulela represents the Muslimwoman in her novels. Soueif, as discussed in my previous chapter, grounds her female protagonists' displacement in a hybridized secular Arab-Western agency neglecting the religious identification, while Aboulela grounds her female protagonists' dislocation in an Islam-based experience that articulates the different possibilities of the Arab women's cross-cultural experience. Commenting on the different ways Soueif and Aboulela articulate the experience of the Arab woman with Muslim roots, Geoffrey Nash says,

Soueif's writing remains inimical to dialogue with contemporary Islamist thinking while Aboulela's evidently does not. They are at variance in the ways they address post-colonial and post-modern predicaments of East and West. Soueif mediates the conflicting divide in the name of a humanizing awareness of the value and space of women. By its assertion of depth, Aboulela's text refutes deconstructionist dogmas of absence, and draws Western emptiness into a rooted Islamic-African core. Both writers inject a non-didactic assurance into their discourse, in the process sign-posting the potential for Muslim women to delimit the boundaries of post-colonial discourse according to their own terms. (31)

Despite the different representations of the Arab Muslim woman experience in the West, whether engaging a secular or a religious experience, both writers participate in the dialogue and debate on the Muslimwoman. It is through literary representation that these writers foreground the varied ways the Muslimwoman approaches her cross-cultural experience, which is basically marked by the protagonists' heterogeneity, diversity, and individualism. In this chapter, I analyze how Aboulela's novels work through the gendered and religious component of the

Muslimwoman label in a way that engages the intersection of these components with European values and culture, creating an identity that is multi-dimensional and cross-cultural with an Islamic facet.

Furthermore, cooke takes the concept of the Muslimwoman a step further by proposing that “Muslim women are today’s new cosmopolitans” (152). She explains that Muslim women in this globalized era connect with one another to disrupt and destabilize the roles they are expected to play or represent. These women negotiate the stereotypes and identities ascribed to them through presenting and representing the multiple articulations of Muslim women’s diverse, nuanced experiences, which destabilize the homogeneous notions ascribed to the Muslimwoman. Muslimwoman cosmopolitanism materializes when Muslim women keep the category Muslimwoman an unsettling site of identity articulation by negotiating the borders and spaces of their religious and gendered identities, in addition to accepting and embracing the very differences that it possibly encompasses. Also, the concept of cosmopolitanism is based on the premise that despite one’s rootedness in a specific location, connections across borders must also include “receptiveness to difference that might instruct and perhaps transform” (152). It is highly significant that a true Muslimwoman cosmopolitanism flourishes where Muslim women display a true sense of commitment toward one another and toward the multiple and varied self-expressions they both articulate and propose.

Being an Anglo-Arab woman concerned with Arab Muslim women literary representations in the post-9/11 era, just like other contemporary Arab woman writers, Aboulela is part of the Muslimwoman cosmopolitan group. Having been born in Egypt, raised in Sudan, where she studied at the Khartoum American School, and spent several years living in both Scotland and England. Her writings have been considered by critics part of the growing

Anglophone Arab literary corpus, and thus, naturally, they have started gaining special attention since 9/11. In her Book, *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*,” Layla Al Maleh asserts that even though Anglophone Arab literature dates back to the turn of the twentieth century, it “did not gain attention or attain recognition until the world woke up one day to the horror of the infamous 9/11 and asked itself who those Arabs really were” (1), the special attention that it has been given is due mainly to the prominence of the Muslimwoman category in mainstream neo-orientalist discourse since 9/11. These political conditions made the works of Anglo-Arab women writers, such as Aboulela, gain attention and readership. From the beginning of her writing career and with the publication of her first novel *The Translator* in 1999, Aboulela has displayed an acute sense of the importance of representing the experience of Muslim women in literary narrative. She engages themes concerning the Muslimwoman experience even prior to the events of 9/11, addressing issues related to the East-West encounter, displacement, acculturation, cultural translation, and faith. Wail Hassan locates Aboulela’s writings as a descendent to Tayib Salih’s writings and other diasporic writers who wrote about the immigrant experience to the North prior to her contemporary generation of writers:

Aboulela’s fiction depicts those unsuspected spaces in the Britain that did not exist in the 1950s and 1960s when Salih penned his early short stories and his widely read novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). Her work represents two historical developments since the 1970s: the Islamic resurgence that has attempted to fill the void left by the failure of Arab secular ideologies of modernity (something that Salih’s fiction as a whole dramatizes)’ and the growth of immigrant Muslim minorities in Europe and the United States. (298)

It is true that Aboulela’s writings, including *The Translator* and *Minaret*, address the experience of diasporic subjects after the “Islamic resurgence” that is being represented in literature.

Whether identifying with it or refusing it, Aboulela’s writings remain individualistic

representations of the Arab Muslim woman's experience without being ideological, squeezed between the secular and Islamic worldview. What characterizes her writings is that they are concerned with the individual experience of the diasporic Arab woman subject and the way she negotiates this identity with the European settings she encounters. "What her fictional project accomplishes is the articulation in English fiction of an immigrant Muslim woman's worldview" (3).

While Aboulela's novels represent the specific gendered journey of her Sudanese female protagonists, Sammar and Najwa, from the South to the North, several literary critics, such as Geoffrey Nash, Ghazoul, and Wail Hassan, have highlighted the ways in which Aboulela's representation of journey from the South to the North have been influenced by Tayeb Salih's novel, *Season of Migration to the North*. Wail Hassan analyzes the ways in which Aboulela's fictional project builds on, departs from, and contradicts the predicaments made by Salih when representing the North/South<sup>xxviii</sup> encounter:

[Aboulela] rewrites Tayeb Salih's rewriting of Joseph Conrad, but while moving away from the (post)colonial dialectic of "writing back," which has so far served as the primary paradigm of postcolonial African narrative. In effect, Aboulela's fiction represents an attempt not so much to reverse, rewrite, or answer back to colonial discourse, but to achieve an epistemological break with it. What Aboulela's fiction represents, in one sense, is the possibility "to join South to North under the emblem of a universal quest, that of Islamic humanism (Ghazoul)." (299)

It is true that Aboulela is highly influenced by Tayeb Salih's works: the intertextuality and literary allusions to Salih's works, specifically *Season of Migration to the North* attests to that<sup>xxix</sup>. Also, just like Salih, Aboulela represents the journey from the South to the North and the dilemmas postcolonial protagonists deal with when located in empire. Yet, the gendering of her narratives as female marks a break with Salih's work. Aboulela is not necessarily interested in representing the clash between North and South, the colonizer and the colonized, and the

violence that occurs in such an aggressive encounter. On the contrary, despite the awareness of the colonial history between the two places, England and Sudan, Aboulela's novels are highly gendered and personalized: we closely follow the individual geographic, psychological, emotional, and spiritual journeys her female protagonists go through while attempting to find a stable sense of belonging and home in England or Scotland, where they relocate to. Thus, in reading Aboulela's novels and because the novels almost exclusively represent her female protagonists' personal life development, it remains impossible to reduce their nuanced experiences as representations of specific postcolonial discourses and ideological projects. Aboulela's novels are personal gendered narratives that address the complexity of the experience of Muslim Arab women in diasporic locations.

In *The Translator*, Aboulela's protagonist, Sammar, is a Sudanese woman who travels to Aberdeen, Scotland, in order to work as a translator for a professor in the Middle Eastern Department at a university there. Throughout her journey, Sammar not only translates texts, but also engages in translating the places, spaces, and people she encounters into a familiar language and metaphor that relates them to her home, Khartoum, Sudan. While living in Aberdeen, Sammar constantly negotiates between her identity as an independent Muslimwoman with a firm Islamic worldview and the Western gaze toward her that reduces her to a Muslimwoman with a singular subjectivity. However, she manages to make Aberdeen a contact zone in which she does not have to compromise her values as a practicing Muslim woman, but rather engages the nuanced complexities of living as a Muslimwoman in the West.

Similarly, Najwa, the protagonist in *Minaret*, engages the Muslimwoman identity while negotiating her gender, sexuality, and awakening Islamic faith during her exile in Britain. Najwa, who was born into an upper-middle-class, liberal, secular, Westernized family back in Khartoum,

finds herself replacing those values with a more conservative, humble, and Islamic lifestyle while displaced in Britain. By displacing Najwa's religious identity in the West while taking her through a cross-cultural experience, Aboulela addresses the theme of religious negotiation that is part of the Muslimwoman experience. In both her novels Aboulela addresses the experience of the Muslimwoman as a diasporic subject who is constantly engaging identity negotiation, cultural translation, counteracculturation, and faith, creating their individual, personal geographies within foreign spaces they construct as personal empowering sites.

It is important to note that while Aboulela valorizes the Muslimwoman identification through the representation of her protagonists, it remains a problematic identification that could be misread as an essentializing identification by competing Orientalist and Islamic fundamentalist discourses on Muslim women. Using the Muslimwoman term as a means to representing the Muslim woman experience limits Muslim women's agency to locate their "sense of subjectivity and identity outside the parameters that have been determined for [them]" (Zine 110). It is important to identify the different ways the Muslimwoman identification could be limiting for women who don't identify with the label and refute it all together as a leading feature of their identity and subjectivity. Yet, there are some women whom the Muslimwoman identification provides them with social mobility, a fact that provides them with agency and empowerment. This divide between those who benefit from the Muslimwoman identification and those whom are limited by it is one that should be emphasized when discussing the Muslim woman experience or representing it in literary narratives. In her novels, Aboulela valorizes the Muslimwoman identification not as an essentializing identity marker but as one that provides her female protagonists with a means of individual mobility, empowerment, and agency.

### ***The Translator: Translating Place, Religion and the Self***

*The Translator* involves multiple journeys the female protagonist, Sammar, undertakes between Sudan (South) and Scotland (North), the two most important being when Sammar travels with her husband, Tarig, to Aberdeen in pursuit of his medical degree, and the second when she moves to Aberdeen to be a translator between Arabic and English for a professor of Middle Eastern history and politics, Rae Isles, with whom she falls in love during the course of the novel. The first journey is interrupted shortly after her husband is killed in a car accident, forcing her to return back to Khartoum with her baby son, Amir. The second is interrupted when she decides to return to Khartoum upon her failed romantic relationship with Rae. We learn about the first journey through a series of flashbacks that come to Sammar during her second journey. The conflation of the two journeys, both spatial and temporal, is important to Sammar: first, she is able to heal from the oppressiveness of the grief and depression the first journey plunged her into along with the oppressiveness of certain elements of Sudanese culture, such as the suppressing power of her mother-in-law (who is also her aunt). Second, she is able to engage a healthy and balanced cross-cultural experience with the West and North, where her religious and Islamic spiritual identity becomes the site of her cross-cultural negotiation.

The trope of journeying back and forth between Sudan and Scotland, which parallels the trope of translating texts from Arabic to English, serves as a motif for the constant engagement of the diasporic subject, Sammar, with home, Khartoum, and the other geography, Aberdeen, and her careful negotiation of her gendered, emotional, and Islamic religious identity. Journey allows Sammar to finally map her personal geography and inscribe her religious and spiritual worldview on it despite her geographic location. Also, the trope of translation serves as a motif for the linguistic, cultural, and religious self-transfer and transition into a “self-constituting landscape of faith, diaspora and identity” (Ball 119). Thus, through the trope of translating both of her

protagonist's journeys, physical and spiritual, Aboulela presents a reconstructive image of the Muslimwoman, whose experience asserts the individuality and uniqueness of her identity and subjectivity.

### **“Home” Is Where the “Heart” Is?**

“Ours is not a religion of suffering,” he said, “nor is it tied to a particular place.”

(Aboulela 198)

*The Translator* closes soon after these lines are spoken by Rae Isles, Sammar's boss and husband-to-be, after his conversion to Islam. Upon arriving to Khartoum to propose to Sammar and to ask that she return to Aberdeen with him, Rae brings up the most essential theme the novel articulates: faith is not tied to a specific geographic place. Rae realizes this upon the personal spiritual journey he undertakes while located in Scotland, where he finally takes on the decision to convert to Islam. Prior to this, Rae undertakes a trip to Morocco, and he has made several visits to Egypt to advance his research in Middle Eastern politics and history. However, his conversion to Islam takes him to Khartoum to propose marriage to Sammar, where they plan their future journey back to Aberdeen, experiencing a sense of belonging to a shared religious identity wherever they settle. Likewise, throughout the multiple journeys she undertakes between the South and the North, Sammar constantly searches for a landscape to translate her selfhood, emotions, faith, and identity—a place of belonging. As they unfold, Sammar's journeys in reality (dis)locate and fragment her identity until she experiences the collapse of the here, Khartoum, and there, Aberdeen, into one, mapping her spiritual and religious geography, which is detached from any specific physical geographic place. The feelings of alienation and fragmentation that accompany the condition of physical displacement Sammar experiences both in Khartoum and in



Aberdeen are overcome eventually when she matures spiritually, and only then do “[a]ll the splinters inside her com[e] together” (Aboulela 66). This reintegration of a self and identity that happens once Sammar experiences movement from one place to another implies that her spiritual journey informs her identity and constitutes its core.

From the outset, the title of the novel, *The Translator*, implies the act of translation that entails movement, in the sense of transferring text from one language to another. However, throughout the narrative, the act of translation as transfer and movement projects itself as three types of movement. The first is physical movement from one geographic place to another, in the case of the novel Sammar’s movement from the South, Khartoum, to the North, Aberdeen, then her return trip back to the South. This physical movement follows Sammar’s journey from Khartoum to Aberdeen, engaging in the act of constantly translating her home, culture, faith, and identity into the new place, while trying to translate the new place into a familiar territory she could connect to.

This leads to the second type of movement, which actually was the trigger for her spatial movement: the linguistic translation of texts from Arabic to English. Had it not been for Sammar’s job at the university in Scotland, her second journey to Aberdeen would not have taken place.

The third type of movement is the temporal translation Sammar engages in between her past and present, which emerges in the novel in the flashbacks that transfer her past into her present, offering her a healing effect of some sort. Sammar starts to tackle the oppressive feelings of grief over the death of her husband by grounding it more in religious concepts of fate and God’s will, which will also aid her when facing the oppressive relationship she has with her

mother-in-law back home, who has accused her of being the reason behind the death of her son. It is significant that in the process of engaging and negotiating the spatial, linguistic, and temporal translations, Sammar falls in love with Rae and tries to translate her experience and Islamic worldview for him, since she becomes interested in fulfilling the love relationship by marriage. More often than not in the novel, translating language, place, time, worldview, and the self seems impossible because of the incompatibility of the two places Sammar moves between, the South and the North. However, once Sammar is able to connect her emotional and spiritual fulfillment to the way she experiences place, a satisfying translation of self becomes possible despite her physical geographic location.

Upon arriving to Aberdeen and taking on her first translation task, Sammar's anxiety plunges her into a dream where she imagines that she is trapped at "home," afraid of braving the deadly harsh weather to reach Rae, her boss, and give him her translation:

She dreamt that it rained and she could not go out to meet him as planned. She could not walk through the hostile water, risk blurring the ink on the pages he had asked her to translate. And the anxiety that she was keeping him waiting pervaded the dream, gave it an urgency that was astringent to grief. She was afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this country, afraid of the wind even. At such time she would stay indoors and wait, watching from her window people doing what she couldn't do: Children walking to school through the swirling leaves, the elderly smashing ice on the pavement with their walking sticks. They were superhuman, giants who would not let the elements stand in their way. 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, drinking tea without milk. (3)

This first encounter with the Scottish landscape, even if in a dream, marks feelings of alienation and estrangement that are the highlight of the diasporic subject's experience upon encountering foreign lands. The Scottish rain, fog, wind, and snow offer a setting of extremely hostile weather that gives a sense of inactivity, immobility, helplessness, and indoors confinement, where

Sammar cannot depart from her apartment, as the confrontation with the elements outside arouses the sense of fear in her.

In addition, the heavy rain outside might ruin Sammar's translated document, which would render going out to meet Rae pointless. The depiction Aboulela starts the novel with—of the harsh weather of the North, Scotland, and how it immobilizes and isolates Sammar and poses danger to her translated text—foregrounds the difficulty Sammar will continue to experience while trying to smoothly translate herself into the North's landscape. Sammar, the translator by vocation, will face multiple obstacles while translating herself, culture, worldview, and grief into this seemingly impermeable landscape. This paragraph reveals Sammar's dislocation, where the clear distinction between the weather Sammar was used to back home in Sudan and the weather in Scotland render her immobile and confined indoors, making it difficult if not impossible to interact with the Scottish landscape.

Upon waking up, Sammar notices that in contrast to the dream she has just had, it is not raining, but rather there is a "grey October sky, Scottish grey with mist from the North Sea. And she does go out to meet Rae Isles as planned, clutching her blue folder with the translation of *Al-Nidaa's* manifesto" (3). In reality the weather turned out not to be as severe as in her dream, and thus Sammar's mobility is possible. Significantly, Sammar meets Rae at the "Winter Gardens (an extended greenhouse in Duthies Park)" (4). If anything, the Winter Gardens conjure up the image of cold weather that Sammar has escaped from when waking up from her sleep; however, the garden is a greenhouse that houses many tropical plants that have been uprooted, displaced from their natural habitat, to be grown in special warm conditions prepared for their survival. Also, what is interesting about these plants is their responsiveness; they survive in this new environment and "set down their roots in order to flourish; a deeply symbolic gesture towards the

natural and generative need of all living things to find a terrain—whether literal or spiritual—in which to root themselves, and so to grow” (Ball 120). This image of the greenhouse and the tropical plants growing in it represent Sammar’s self-imposed exile. Just like the plants, which have been offered special nurturing and nourishing conditions for their mere survival in a territory that would have otherwise killed them, Sammar has to search for a similar site of survival, which, as the novel will demonstrate, is not a physical geographic site, but rather a spiritual one.

Also, the description of the Winter Gardens is meant to conjure up the image of Sudan, highlighting the contrast between Khartoum and Aberdeen: “The cacti were like rows of aliens in shades of green, of different heights, standing still, listening. They were surrounded by sand for the room was meant to give the impression of a desert” (Aboulela 5). This image of the imitation desert landscape juxtaposes the landscape of the South with that of the North, which becomes “irrelevant above the glass ceiling,” marking the clear distinction between the here and the there (4). This familiar environment reminds Sammar of elements of the past connected to home, and to both fortunate and unfortunate events. When asked if her name has the same pronunciation as the word summer, Sammar answers in the affirmative, explaining that her parents named her Sammar upon her birth in Aberdeen. When returning to Khartoum at the age of seven, Sammar’s name was foreign to her acquaintances in Khartoum, where even when she grew older, she was “the only Sammar at school and at college” (5). Rae then becomes curious to know the meaning of her name: “It 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” (5). Perhaps this name chosen by her parents while living in Aberdeen reflects their nostalgia for home, the desert and all the social interactions with relatives and loved ones a

person in diaspora misses out on. Most significantly, Sammar's name is forever connected to a social and geographic site that she has left behind; she now experiences feelings of loneliness, alienation, confinement, and dislocation away from the environment that would have offered her "*sammar*" nights with friends and relatives. This disparity between what Sammar's name means and the actual reality of her lonely existence in Aberdeen further emphasizes the contrast between the North and the South. Also, since Sammar's life in Aberdeen does not relate to any of the meanings and notions her name entails—social mingling, interaction and entertainment—translating herself into this diasporic location seems difficult; she cannot fully communicate, and she even mistranslates herself into her new location.

Furthermore, once Sammar starts feeling comfortable in the Winter Gardens that remind her of home, the suppressed past and grief of her first journey as a married adult in Aberdeen starts surfacing into her present through flashbacks. These flashbacks bring to her the images of her mother-in-law, Mahasen, who used to treat her like a daughter before blaming her for the death of her son, as well as of her sister-in-law, Hanan, her deceased husband, Tarig, and her baby son, Amir, whom she cannot connect to as a nurturing mother. Also, they bring back memories of how her religious identity has helped her survive the twofold grief of losing her husband and of living in exile. Sammar starts narrating to Rae parts of that past while "wondering which parts of the narrative to soften, to omit" (6).

Sammar's first flashback relates to her experience upon losing her husband and the way the community of Muslim women who came to offer her support helped ground her sanity and keep her from losing herself in pain:

They prayed, recited the Qur'an, spent the night on the couch and on the floor. They did not leave her alone, abandoned. She went between them dazed, thanking them, humbled

by the awareness that they were stronger than her, more giving than her, though she thought of herself as more educated, better dressed. She covered her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colours. She wanted 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 mujahideen. Now the presence of these women kept her sane, held her up. [...]. Only Allah is eternal, only Allah is eternal. (9)

Sammar's religious identity is brought up through her expression of grief: she prays that she might be spared further grief. It is through the community of women, her prayer, and her spirituality that Sammar survives her heavy burden of grief. For Sammar, the sense of loss is negotiated through spirituality, where even the act of covering her hair and body, metaphorically disguising her pain, helps her cope with her loss and thus connects her to the women who prove to even be better than she is, offering her support while she used to think of herself as "more educated" and "better dressed" (9). It seems that Sammar dons the veil for the first time upon experiencing the death of her husband out of humility and humbleness to God out of intense grief over her loss. Also, when Sammar later experiences sadness and grief due to her alienation in exile, the only thing that grounds her in reality physically is the five prayers, "the last touch with normality; without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night" (16). The flashbacks that come to her in Rae's presence while she is sitting in the Winter Gardens, which remind her of home, represent the religious consciousness with which Aboulela endows her protagonist while connecting it to a sense of home and belonging.

Furthermore, the flashbacks bring Sammar memories from back home: she remembers her initial good relationship with her mother-in-law and how that relationship shifted in nature after the death of her husband. She tells Rae about the loving relationship she once had with her mother-in-law but keeps from him the fact that her aunt frowns in the present whenever Sammar's name is mentioned because she blames her for the death of her son. Also, Sammar tells Rae about her son, whom she left with her mother-in-law, but she leaves out the fact that

“[s]he was unable to mother the child” any longer after the death of her husband (7). In flashbacks, she remembers that she looked at her child and told him, “I wish it was you instead. I hate you. I hate you” (7). The intense loss she experiences upon the death of Tarig, her mother-in-law’s hatred of her, and the vanished feelings of motherhood start coming back to her in the flashbacks, and she thinks she must articulate them to Rae so that she becomes “clear” of them; the only way that happens is when “she start[s] to speak” (7).

Yet Sammar is selective when she picks what part of the flashbacks to relate to Rae because the intense grief she has experienced in the past defies translation. As much as she tries to translate her own pain and grief into words, she fails, since she is not able to articulate the most horrible of them, keeping the pain suppressed inside of her. Because of her inability to translate pain into words, she starts feeling that the pain has taken a physical dimension, as though it has marked her body:

Her invisible mark shifted, breathed its existence. [...]. Four years ago, this mark had crystallised. Grief had formed, taken shape, a diamond shape, its four angles stapled on to her forehead, each shoulder, the top of her stomach. She knew it was translucent, she knew that it had a mercurial liquid which flowed up and down slowly when she moved. The diamond shape of grief made sense to her: her forehead—that was where it hurt when she cried, that space behind her eyes; her shoulders—because they curled to carry her heart. And the angle at the top of her stomach—that was where the pain was. (4)

Even though there remains something untranslatable and untransferable about Sammar’s pain, the inscription of it on her body makes it a tangible experience, despite her attempts to suppress it. This mark and the pain that caused it must eventually be related verbally so that a cathartic effect will take place. However, Sammar’s failure to translate this pain into words can be linked to the difficulty she faces trying to translate her new environment into a familiar geography so that she can connect to it. Heather Hewett proposes that “the spatial manifestation of loss as a “diamond shape” suggest the four corners of a map, or of a compass, literally inscribed on the

body. Like migration, loss possess a geography; and ‘stapled’ viscerally conveys the ever-present pain of loss” (267). The depiction of the pain as occupying a bodily geography just like the pain she endures due to her recent geographic exile from her home causes Sammar to suffer a body marked with the manifestation of this pain.

It is difficult for Aboulela to fully describe and represent the pain as a physical marker on Sammar’s body because pain in reality is intangible. When reading Sammar’s marked pain, Brenda Cooper, in her article, “Everyday Objects and Translation,” reiterates the premise of Elaina Scarry’s theories on pain and the body: “The novel works hard to describe the body in pain, something which Elaina Scarry (1989) has warned us is notoriously difficult to represent” (45). However, Cooper tries to read this physical pain by linking the geography of the bodily pain Sammar suffers because of the loss of her husband with the condition of exile she cannot easily translate: “We see the physical agony written onto her body is the result of her attempts to negotiate between her worlds, [...] Khartoum and Aberdeen” (45). Because it becomes impossible for her to articulate to Rae the intensity of the pain she suffers, Sammar prefers not to speak of it and leaves it as an “invisible mark” imprinted on her forehead, her shoulders, and the top of her stomach—where it is most burdening.

Despite the familiarity of the Aberdeen Winter Gardens, the setting remains an artificial imitation of an atmosphere that reminds Sammar of home. In his book chapter, “Leila Aboulela: Islam and Globalization,” Geoffrey Nash points out that by employing the technique of de-familiarization when depicting the Western landscape and its relationship to the “émigré’s deracination,” Aboulela juxtaposes “the flavor of Africa against a Western setting,” which reflects a “usual exile’s routine” (137). While I agree with Nash’s general assessment regarding the techniques the exile uses to become familiar with foreign landscape, it seems that the



disparity between the two places for Sammar is minimized, even if temporarily, when the Scottish landscape becomes a familiar one to her. “Without the unnatural world of the hothouse, Sammar’s Aberdeen—perhaps predictably—is alien yet familiar” (Stotesbury 74). Bringing a familiar landscape to an unfamiliar setting is a strategy Aboulela employs to relate how the personal untranslatable experiences of her protagonist become familiarized to her when she starts translating herself into the new place gradually, especially in the presence of Rae. Throughout the narrative, Sammar will continue to experience this defamiliarized setting and landscape, where home emerges into the Scottish setting every time she tries to relate her own physical, cultural, emotional, and religious experiences to the new place. Also, it is when Sammar feels emotionally connected to Rae that the merging of spatial and temporal settings takes place. However, what remains a question for Sammar throughout the narrative is whether the romantic and emotional feelings she holds towards Rae are enough to trigger sustainable feelings that she belongs in this diasporic environment.

Significantly, it is not only the greenhouse that is defamiliarized so that it can have that different yet familiar effect on Sammar’s life while she is displaced in Aberdeen. Rae is also represented in a defamiliarized manner; attributes considered typical of a Scotsman are absent, but he holds “familiar” attributes that Sammar can reach out and relate to. Rae is not typically Scottish in features, traits, attributes, or even interests. He constantly makes Sammar feel comfortable and reminds her of people from back home.

He knew the letters of the Arabic alphabet, he had lived in her part of the world. Rae looked like he could easily pass for a Turk or a Persian. He was dark enough. He told her once that in Morocco he could walk as if disguised; none suspected he was Scottish as long as he did not speak and let his pronunciation give him away. With others, he looked to her to be out of place, not only because of his looks but his manners. The same manners which made her able to talk to him made the world vivid for the first time in years. (6)

We learn that Rae does not look like a total foreigner to Sammar. It turns out that he is familiar with “her part of the world,” he has familiar looks, and he is familiar with the language Sammar speaks. This familiarity does not stop at that; Rae’s manners are familiar to her: she feels comfortable to speak to him, and she even falls in love with him as the narrative unfolds. In addition, because Sammar is able to connect to Rae emotionally and express herself to him, while he dedicates time to listening to her, “[from] the beginning she had thought that he was not one of them, not modern like them, not impatient like them. He talked to her as if she had not lost anything, as if she were the same Sammar of the past” (30).

At a certain point in the novel, as Sammar starts having more of a personal relationship with Rae beyond work, she starts describing him in familiar terms. Upon paying Rae a visit with Yasmin, Rae’s Pakistani Muslim secretary and whom Sammar’s friend, Sammar feels closer to Rae than she had before. During the visit, the subject matter the three discuss is Rae’s interest in and affinity for studying the Middle East and Islam: he admits that he became interested in learning about Islam academically when he was a child through an uncle who moved to Egypt and converted to Islam. Discussing Islam brings Sammar a huge step forward in terms of her emotional connection to Rae; she starts seeing a potential relationship between them. Even if at this point it remains too early for Sammar to assume that Rae would ever convert to Islam, she asks Yasmin upon leaving Rae’s house, “Do you think he could one day convert?” (22). As she becomes more familiar with Rae and starts to connect to him emotionally, Sammar feels as if home has come to where she is:

Outside, Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just for her. She saw the sky cloudless with too many stars, imagined the night warm, warmer than indoors. She smelled dust and heard the barking of stray dogs among the street’s rubble and potholes. A bicycle tinkled, frogs croaked, the muezzin coughed

into the microphone and began the azan for the Isha prayer. But this was Scotland and reality left her dulled, unsure of herself. (20- 21)

As Sammar feels closer to Rae emotionally, she starts envisioning the fusion of home and the Scottish landscape, familiarizing the landscape with images, sounds, and smells that are connected to her home. Not only does she experience the Scottish landscape in familiar terms, but she also feels “that Rae is different. [...] He’s sort of familiar, like people from back home” (21). Sammar’s experience of the landscape is directly connected to her emotional state, and when she starts connecting emotionally to Rae, she starts seeing a possible reconciliation between her two worlds. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that this fusion of home and the Scottish landscape come to her through an artificial greenhouse setting and in a “hallucination in which the world had swung around,” which indicates that Sammar remains confused regarding her feelings towards the landscape she is situated in, and also by the state of her feelings for Rae, a confusion that plunges her into hallucination and dullness. However, once Sammar reaches home and is physically distant from Rae, she suffers a headache that will not go away until she sleeps. Because Sammar’s sense of location and familiarity is connected to her feelings for Rae, it becomes important that the romantic relationship remain sustainable so that Sammar experiences her location in a stabilized manner; otherwise, she will remain dislocated from the surrounding and physical landscape she dwells in.

Because Sammar’s perception of landscape and place become connected to her emotional state with Rae, once he is absent she feels dislocated and disconnected from her surroundings. When she does not see him or talk to him for a couple of weeks during the winter break and while school is out, Sammar’s perception of the landscape emphasizes the difference and disconnection between the South and the North:

She said that colours made her sad. Yellow as she knew it and green as she knew it were not here, not bright and vivid as they should be. She had stacked the differences; the weather, the culture, modernity, the language, the silence of the muezzin, then found that the colours of mud, sky and leaves were different. (39)

Feelings of nostalgia for home start invading Sammar's emotional landscape: she no longer can connect to Aberdeen nor see home, Khartoum, in it in any way. While Rae is physically absent, Sammar starts experiencing Aberdeen in the sense of absence; the vivid colors, smells, and sounds from back home that she was able to conjure up in this foreign setting are now absent just as Rae is. At this moment, the disparity between the landscapes, cultures, language, and religions are highlighted in Sammar's perception of her diasporic experience. However, once Sammar reconnects with Rae and is in touch with her feelings for him, the fusion of home and the foreign landscape takes place yet again. When Rae calls Sammar towards the end of the winter break, her senses once more recall the smells, sounds and feelings connected to home:

She ran up the stairs that she has often taken a step at a time, dragging her grief. Now the staircase has a different aura, a different light. [...] Where was she now, which country? What year? She climbed the stairs into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home and the past had come here and balanced just for her. (41)

The feelings of comfort with Rae and her emotional connection to him causes Sammar to forget where she is and thus gain a physical comfort in her location despite her dislocation from her actual home. Connecting her experience of landscape and home to her emotional experience will prove throughout the narrative not sufficient for Sammar to fully feel at home.

It is only when Sammar connects her emotions with her faith and religion that she is able to reconcile her sense of fully belonging with a satisfying relationship with Rae. Upon Rae's return to school after the winter break and upon her stronger emotional attachment towards him, she starts wondering whether Rae could possibly convert to Islam. Sammar's religious consciousness starts irking her when she imagines that Rae's secularism will stand in the way of

her everlasting happiness. When Yasmin asks her if Rae intends to convert, Sammar becomes so uncomfortable that she starts wondering if Rae even believes in God. At that moment she feels like her world has been shattered and runs downstairs to the phone to call Rae and get a comforting answer that will hold her world together. While waiting for Rae to answer, with every phone ring Sammar feels “the unanswered ring cutting through emptiness, a windy place” (94). Unlike usually, when she is comforted by the mere presence of Rae, which conjures up images of home, now that she feels destabilized because of the different religious views they both hold, she feels that some elements of the Scottish wind and cold are seeping into her body. When Rae answers the phone, she immediately asks him, “Rae, do you believe in God? [...] You’re not a... an... atheist?” Rae answers, “No, I’m not” (95). However, Sammar continues to feel uncomfortable: even if Rae believes in God, it is Islam that needs to become his faith if they are to consummate their relationship and get married.

The reconciliation of places that is connected to Sammar’s emotional state while she is with Rae in Aberdeen does come to a halt when she becomes overly involved emotionally with Rae but he refuses to convert to Islam, making their marriage impossible. Sammar feels that this climactic moment of rejection destabilizes her emotions and connection to place; she then decides to return home, accepting a translation task in Egypt that will delay her arrival for a couple of weeks. Upon the emerging feelings of hurt and rejection she suffers, the sense of displacement is heightened, and she starts retreating to a state of alienation and detachment from her surroundings; the once-familiar setting becomes totally foreign to her. After leaving Rae’s office upon his refusal to convert to Islam, Sammar fully experiences the freezing cold of this foreign environment as harsh as it could have ever been: “Everything clear and cold. Her breath

smoke, the snow speckles of diamonds to step on” (129). Once she boards the plane and is above Aberdeen, all she sees is a “[s]mall, compact city that belittled her hope” (132).

Even though at the moment of her departure Sammar is fully estranged from the landscape of Aberdeen because her hopes for Rae’s conversion have been vanquished, she panics about the mixed feelings she has towards home: “She thought of going home, seeing home again, its colours again and in spite of yearning, all she had now was reluctance and some fear” (87). However, once she is back to Khartoum, the first thing she does is participate in a group prayer at the mosque, reconnecting with the spirituality and faith that is rooted and connected to home:

When she stood her shoulders brushed against the women at each side of her, straight lines, then bending together but not precisely at the same time, not slick, not synchronized, but rippled and the rustle of clothes until the foreheads rested on the mats. Under the sky, the grass underneath it, it was a different feeling from praying indoors, a different glow. She remembered having to hide in Aberdeen, being alone. She remembered wanting him to pray like she prayed hoping, for it. The memory made her say, *Lord, keep sadness away from me.* (159- 160)

This passage offers an insight into how Sammar experiences location and self-location as a diasporic subject returning back home. On a superficial level, it seems that Sammar’s sense of belonging and home stem from inserting herself back into the landscape of her home, Sudan, and connecting to its community, and its spirituality rooted in the Islamic faith. Also, this connection to home and Islam highlights the loneliness Sammar felt praying alone in Aberdeen. Yet this sense of belonging is not enough to offer Sammar a fully satisfactory, nourishing spiritual experience. While praying, Sammar’s displaced emotions connected to Aberdeen are evoked: it seems that she imagines that had Rae accepted Islam and not left her to pray alone, he would have been the substitute to this community of prayers, and that alone would have offered her enough spiritual nourishment and grounding despite her location. In fact, the supplication she utters after performing the prayer, “*Lord, keep sadness away from me,*” reflects the agony and

sadness she continues to experience: first, Rae does not share her same faith, and second, he is absent from her home in the geographical sense. In reality, home for Sammar does not offer a full sense of belonging, since she remains in a state of agony over the absence of an emotionally satisfying experience. Even home and her faith together do not offer any remedy for Sammar in this case.

Sammar's fear of home materializes as she sets foot in Khartoum, where she will have to confront yet again the past grief that she worked her way through when she was in Aberdeen. She finds that Mahasen has not yet gotten over blaming her for the death of her son; once she accuses Sammar of being a liar, of quitting her job in Aberdeen so that she would not have to contribute to Mahasen financially. When Sammar speaks back at her, Mahasen says, "You're a liar and you killed my son. [...] You nagged him for that car and that car killed him" (171).

Numbed by the grief rekindled in Khartoum, and disappointed with the harsh reality of home, Sammar starts experiencing the same dullness, crippling pain, dreams, and hallucinations that prevent her from fully sensing the reality of her immediate landscape. Due to the sense of emotional detachment she feels toward the people around her while she is at home, she starts envisioning that Aberdeen has appeared in Sudan. This vision comes to her while she is feeling uncomfortable by the hot summer, so she goes to fetch a cold glass of water from the fridge for her demanding aunt:

The sudden chill when she opened the fridge door on a day that was too hot; the blue cold, frost and it was Aberdeen where he was, his jacket and walking in grey against the direction of the wind. White seagulls and a pale sea, until her aunt behind her shouted, "What are you doing standing like an idiot with the door of the fridge wide open. Everything will melt." (182)

Since the image of a home that feels like home does not materialize in Sammar's life, her sense of belonging to Khartoum is destabilized and falls apart. Her search for a landscape to translate

herself, emotions, and identity into fails, even though she finds some sense of sensory familiarity in the landscape and religious and spiritual fulfillment. However, the sense of dislocation continues to invade her life while she is in Khartoum, where the cold and frost of the fridge bring back familiar images from Aberdeen. Not only does the landscape of Aberdeen emerge into her present, she envisions Rae walking against the wind, perhaps toward the South—Khartoum. However, once such visions disappear and she realizes that she is at home, yet suffering a sense of alienation and loneliness, she retreats to sleep: “She wanted a bed and a cover, sleep. She wanted to sleep like she used to sleep in Aberdeen, everything muffled up and grey, curling up, covering her face with the blanket, her breath warming the cocoon she had made for herself” (171). The dislocation Sammar feels and the collapse of the here and there continue to fragment her identity: Sammar chooses to shut herself away, detaching herself from her immediate physical landscape.

Sammar’s experience of the cold while in Khartoum—just as the reverse had happened to her in Aberdeen, where she experienced the heat of the Winter Gardens in the midst of the cold Scottish winter—signifies that the disparity between the two locations will not allow her a full sense of belonging to either place. Her sense of belonging is experienced partially in Aberdeen through her emotional relationship with Rae, yet it is never complete. Conversely, her religion and spirituality are partially experienced in Khartoum, where the community keeps her in touch with them, yet she remains sad due to the absence of familial and romantic love. Thus, her life continues to be defined in terms of lack until she reaches a point where her sense of belonging is fulfilled despite the location she exists in.

This becomes possible once Sammar realizes that both emotional and spiritual love are not attached to any physical place or landscape, a fact she realizes towards the end of the



narrative. It is when Rae converts to Islam out of sincere conviction and comes to Khartoum to propose to her and take her back to Aberdeen that she grasps that confessing and belonging to a religion are not exclusive to certain people or rooted in specific places. Upon first hearing about his conversion through a friend, who sends her a letter with the news, Sammar writes to Rae telling him, *“Please come and see me. Please. Here is where I am...”* (191). While Rae has offered Sammar a sense of home in Aberdeen previously, he did not fully offer her a sense of belonging due to the different religious identities they held. However, once he converts to Islam, Rae offers a full reconciliation of the physical, emotional, and the spiritual. Mainly, Rae’s conversion to Islam out of sincere conviction: he translates Islam into a faith he believes in, and he offers Sammar a space and place that is not connected to a specific physical geography, since Islam is not a religion “tied to a particular place” (198). Thus, one can obtain a sense of belonging and home while disconnected from any specific geographical location, which gives this sense a universal space, anywhere and everywhere. Also, what Aboulela tries to establish at the end of the narrative is that in this transnational, global world, “location is not an essential ingredient of Muslim practice any more” (Steiner 3).

### **Lost/Found in Translation: Translating Text, Worldview and the Self**

It is because Sammar accepts a translation job at a Scottish University in Aberdeen working for Rae Isles that her departure from home ensues. However, once she discovers that she is failing at the very task she departed to Aberdeen for, translation, she decides upon another departure back home to Khartoum. During both of her departures and the subsequent arrivals, whether abroad or at home, Sammar engages linguistic, cultural, and religious translation, a task that proves to be difficult, and at times impossible due to the disparity between the two languages and worlds she operates in. Living between two worlds for Sammar will involve

translating the South into the North, the Arabic language into English, and her Islamic faith into a secular world. At times, Sammar is not aware that even though she takes the task of translating the aforementioned components sincerely, there are elements that by nature remain untranslatable.

Sammar's failure to translate is not entirely her fault, as Aboulela suggests in the novel. Her condition as a diasporic subject operating and living between two different cultures, languages, and worldviews involves translation, mistranslation, and impossible translations. Once Sammar realizes that her task as a translator is actually to transfer and render meaning from the source language and culture to the target one and not to reproduce it, which is an impossible task, she becomes able to communicate successfully between her two worlds. Losing and finding meaning in the process of translation is an element she negotiates while trying to grasp what is difficult to translate, her religious identity. However, eventually, when she manages to translate herself, culture, and faith to Rae and Rae does the same successfully, a departure back to Aberdeen becomes possible while the two are reunited.

During a conversation Sammar and Rae have about the difficulties one faces when translating the Qur'an, the following exchange takes place:

He said, "Translations don't do it justice. Much is lost..."

"Yes, the meanings can be translated but not reproduced. And of course, the miracle of it can't be reproduced... But even then, hearing it from the Prophet, peace be upon him, not everyone believed. Not everyone accepted that the source and wording of what they were hearing came from Allah." (124)

This paragraph brings up three particular themes the novel addresses with regards to translation, the first of which is meaning is lost in translation, generally, due to linguistic and cultural differences. Second, translations of the Islamic religious text from Arabic, specifically, to any

other language remain insufficient, since its meaning cannot be reproduced. Throughout the novel, Sammar relentlessly tries to translate the Islamic faith to Rae yet finds certain aspects of it sometimes untranslatable and impossible to communicate due to their different worldviews and cultural disparity. Third, even when the Qur'an and the Islamic faith are translated, it does not necessarily mean that people will believe in it. Significantly, in this paragraph, Aboulela seems to highlight the fact that Sammar will be faced with a triple hardship when engaging in linguistic, cultural, and religious translation for Rae. At times, despite her effort, Sammar will be unable to effectively translate between Arabic and English, the South and the North, and Islam and secularism. However, she will try hard to push "the Arabic into English, English into Arabic," to the extent of mistranslating of Rae's identity and his worldview to suit her own. Yet, when she finds it impossible to fully communicate an effective translation of her world and the world around her, she initiates a departure and leaves the whole task behind disappointed. Sammar matures as a devout Muslim when she realizes that everything is in the hands of God and that everything hinges on only God's will, whether it suits her or not. Just when Sammar learns how to negotiate what she can acquire out of her own choice and how her choices are regulated through God's will, she matures. Furthermore, once Rae finds what was lost in Sammar's translation and communication with him, he initiates his own departure that starts with a deep spiritual journey to find Islam first and then to find her and offer her marriage.

Sammar travels to Aberdeen after accepting a translation job for the Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the university in Aberdeen. At the time, the Gulf War is taking place, and there is a high demand for religious and political texts to be translated from Arabic to English:

She had been lucky. There was a demand for translating Arabic into English, not much competition. Her fate was etched out by a law that gave her a British passport, a point in time when the demand for people to translate Arabic into English was bigger than the supply. (73).

On the one hand, Sammar's travel to Aberdeen was made possible by the political climate and the high demand for Arabic translators. On the other hand, obtaining the job was possible for her due to her parents' journey to the UK early in their lives; Sammar was born there and thus has gained a British passport. However, Sammar corrects the way she attributes her luck in obtaining the job by remembering that her faith "was etched out by Allah Almighty." Sammar's constant negotiation between actions that happens in the material life and God's will will continue to be a site of negotiation until the end of the novel.

Sammar is usually careful and conscious when attempting to use language and speak or translate, whether she is translating language or the culture, people, and life in Aberdeen. When attempting to speak or translate, Sammar is usually concerned with people's reactions to her, which makes her hyper conscious of what she produces or says: "In this country when she spoke to people, they seemed wary, on their guard, as if any minute she would say something out of place, embarrassing" (6). Thus, upon speaking or translating, Sammar thinks of what "to soften, to omit" of the narrative (6). Just like when speaking or translating, Sammar continues to be alert to the possibilities of mistranslations of language, culture, and people that could occur in her displaced setting, Aberdeen.

Sammar translates for Rae, the secular humanist and a professor of Middle Eastern history and the author of a book called, *The Illusion of an Islamic Threat*. "When he appeared on TV or was quoted in a newspaper, he was referred to as an Islamic expert, a label he disliked because, he told Sammar, there could be no such monolith" (5). Once Sammar is introduced to

him and learns about his academic interest, specializing in the Middle East, the Arabic language, and Islam, her natural tendency is to start questioning why he has this interest in Islam and the Middle East. However, as she starts developing emotional feelings for him, she becomes interested in his actual conviction towards Islam. During her visit to his place, accompanying Yasmin, his secretary, Rae tells them both about how his uncle, who had moved to Egypt when Rae was in middle school, converted to Islam. Being fascinated by his uncle's unusual spiritual route, Rae, who was always a rebel at school, writes an article for a class assignment entitled, "*Islam is Better than Christianity*," which gets him expelled from school (17). However, it turns out that as he grew up, Rae's interest in Islam is only related to the academic realm, spurring on his research about the Middle East, a fact that disappoints Sammar.

After leaving Rae's place, Sammar investigates Rae's ideological background and its connection to his worldview by asking Yasmin about his ideological convection. Yasmin answers,

"He's an orientalist. It's an occupational hazard." Sammar didn't like the word orientalist. Orientalists were bad people who distorted the image of Arabs and Islam. [...] "Do you think he could one day convert?" "That would be professional suicide." (21)

Interestingly, Yasmin uses the word orientalist to describe Rae, even though he studies the Middle East, its culture, and its religion in an "objective" manner. Rae is represented as a modern orientalist who does not view the Arabs or Islam as a threat, unlike traditional orientalists. Also, when Rae started pursuing an academic degree specializing in the Middle East, he traveled to Egypt and Morocco, where he comes into contact with the local people, culture, and politics, allowing a more grounded immersion into the areas of his specialization. As he matures academically, he realizes that he should carefully and responsibly position himself in the Western discourse about the Middle East, saying,

“I wanted to understand the Middle East. No one writing in the fifties and sixties predicted that Islam would play such a significant part in the politics of the area. Even Fanon, who I have always admired, had no insight into the religious feelings of the North African he wrote about. He never made the link between Islam and anti-colonialism.” (109)

Rae stresses how unlike Fanon, who was considered a significant postcolonial theorist but missed the link between Islam and anti-colonialism, his political interest in the Middle East and most of his research was conducted to make that link between Islam and anti-colonialism. This type of research makes it possible for Rae to actually dismiss imperialist and orientalist discourses about the Middle East as biased and inaccurate.

Once Sammar realizes how familiar and sympathetic Rae is toward the Middle East, its culture, and Islam, she starts contemplating the possibility of taking this relationship he has with Islam a step further toward conversion. Yasmin emphasizes the impossibility of such happening, stressing that it would be viewed in the West as if he joining “the religion of terrorists and fanatics. That’s how it would be seen. He’s got enough critics as it is: those who think he is too liberal, those who would have accused him of being a traitor just by telling the truth about another culture. [...] A traitor to the West. You know, the idea that West is best” (22). Rae has been constantly mistranslated by his own people and culture, sometimes accused of being a traitor to his own culture and becoming a target of hate mail and abusive phone calls. However, due to his political stance and his commitment to postcolonial politics, Rae is a man operating between two worlds, and he could be mistranslated in either world. Sammar, on the other hand mistranslates Rae’s academic interest in Islam as a step toward his conversion.

Conversely, Sammar mistranslates Rae and his political stance and sympathy toward the Middle East, constantly attributing his academic knowledge of and sympathy toward the Middle

East and Islam to a personal interest in Islam. When Yasmin senses Sammar's interest in Rae's personal conviction regarding Islam, she says,

“Are you hoping he would convert so you could marry him?”

“Don't be silly, I was just wondering.” She breathed in and out as if it was an effort. Her eyes ached, her nose ached. “I was just wondering because he knows so much about Islam...”

“This annoys him.”

“What annoys him?”

“That Muslims expect him to convert just because he knows so much about Islam.” (22)

This scolding of Sammar by Yasmin for assuming that Rae's mere interest in Middle Eastern politics could portend a conversion reflects a critique of the naive mistranslation of academic interest into religious conviction. Rae's intellectual knowledge about Islam and the Middle East will not be the core reason behind his final decision to convert toward the end of the novel. However, Sammar's disappointment causes her to fall in “silence” and retreat to sleep while supplicating God, “*Ya Allah, ya Arham El-Rahimeen*” (22). When she finally wakes up, she finds that she has rid herself of what she thought must have been “something between a migraine and a fit” (22).

When Rae confesses that he holds emotional feelings towards Sammar, and Sammar mistranslates them into his interest in converting to Islam, he makes it clear that his personal relationship with Islam and the Middle East is detached from his professional interest:

“It's not in me to be religious,” he said. “I studied Islam for the politics of the Middle East. I did not study it for myself. I was not searching for something spiritual. Some people do. I had a friend who went to India and became a Buddhist. But I was not like that. I believed the best I could do, what I owed a place and people who had deep meaning for me, was to be objective, detached. In the middle of all the prejudice and hypocrisy, I wanted to be one of the few who were reasonable and right.” (126)

Rae is devoted academically to Islam and the Middle East, and his approach to it is “objective” and “detached,” since this devotion stems from an intellectual interest. Rae’s approach to Islam up until this moment is intellectual: he deals with it as a distant object of study that he is sincerely interested in, yet he is not interested in becoming part of it on a personal spiritual level.

Once Sammar realizes that conversion is not an option for Rae even when he holds emotional feelings towards her, she retreats internally and falls silent, thinking about how ignorant he might think she is. Not only that, she becomes unable to translate some of the words Rae utters while replying to her request for him to convert. He expresses his feelings for her, saying that he has never felt “empathy” toward somebody before; Sammar grapples with the difficulty of the meaning of the word and mistranslates it:

She did not understand the meaning of the word ‘empathy’. At times, he did say words she could not understand, words she would ask him to explain. Sixties’ scene, Celtic, chock-a-block. But now she did not ask him the meaning of ‘empathy’. Today she could not ask. It sounded like ‘sympathy’, and, she thought, he feels sorry for me. To him I must have always looked helpless and forlorn. (127)

The emotional crisis Sammar experiences because of her misinterpretation of Rae’s conversation with her results in a total crisis of communication and translation from the foreign language, English, to her own mother tongue. Sammar mistranslates Rae’s word *empathy*, which is supposed to leave more of a positive impact on their relationship, and interprets it as *sympathy*, which has a negative impact and results in her retreat. Once Sammar feels disappointment and emotionally lacking, translation becomes impossible. Not only that, she becomes uncomfortable communicating with Rae and thus never asks him about the meaning of words he utters, thus allowing mistranslations to take place. She leaves their final conversation with meanings misinterpreted and feelings lost in translation. This failure to express, ask, and translate makes the rift between her two worlds larger, and she will return to Khartoum having failed to translate



herself into Aberdeen, its landscape, culture, and worldview. The clash of Sammar's worldview with Rae's is a difference that makes them struggle as they translate themselves to one another.

A couple of days prior to Sammar's departure and after the disappointing final conversation she has with Rae, she tries to finalize the last translation task in Aberdeen before leaving but suffers writer's block:

Windows in red and blue flew towards her. They got bigger and clearer as they came close to the surface of the computer screen and then passed away. She had stopped changing the Arabic into English, stopped typing; and the words had flickered and disappeared into the blackness, from which the flying windows now came. (111)

At this point, Sammar stops translating because the words flicker and disappear into blackness that reflects the emptiness she feels due to the failure of effecting a successful translation between her worldview and Rae's. Losing her ability to translate is the climactic point in the narrative: Sammar realizes that Rae's and her own world will not intersect due to the incompatibility of her Islamic devotion with his "objective" and "detached" secular stance toward it (128)

While Sammar is in Egypt on a two-week temporary job as a translator prior to arriving in Khartoum, she spends all her days and nights working hard "pushing Arabic into English, English into Arabic, staying up late with hotel smells, typing out all the interviews" (156). The act of pushing words from Arabic into English and vice versa reflects how troublesome and difficult translating has become for her even after distancing herself from Rae, who was the reason behind her inability to communicate and translate during her last few days in Aberdeen. Even after arriving in Khartoum, and once Sammar loses complete touch with Rae and Aberdeen, she totally loses her ability to translate and thus decides to seek a job away from the field of translation. However, every now and then, when Sammar thinks about her "exile" from

Rae and her past in Aberdeen, she automatically becomes “nostalgic for her old job, the work itself, moulding Arabic into English, trying to be transparent” (164). For Sammar, translation is connected to Rae: they both come to her in nostalgic memories, yet they belong to a distant past that she gradually has no contact with. The use of the word exile in descriptions of her condition when she is physically located in Khartoum, her home, highlights the fact that Sammar does not feel total belonging, even back home: her emotional attachment remains in Aberdeen. Through her word choice, Aboulela asserts that since Sammar does not fully experience emotional satisfaction back home, she remains in a state of internal exile.

After several weeks at home, Sammar receives a letter from Fareed, Rae’s friend, informing her that Rae has gone through a deep spiritual journey and has converted to Islam out of sincere conviction four months prior to Fareed’s writing the letter. Despite Rae’s connection and familiarity with Islam since his childhood, he has not attempted during the years to translate Islam into faith. However, once Rae decides to translate his knowledge of Islam finally into faith, it becomes possible for Sammar and him to be together, since now they share the same worldview and religious identity. Being excited about Rae’s conversion—Sammar now believes the barrier that once separated them no longer exists—she decides to write to Rae in his language not her own. “She had an airmail letter pad with her, a ball-point pen, two envelopes. She was going to write two letters. They would say the same thing but not be a translation” (190).

The decision to write two separate letters without the need for translation marks Sammar’s final break with performing the role of a mediator between languages, cultures, and worldviews. She finally consents to be acculturated to the North and its language without compromising her religious identity, since Rae has also become acculturated with her own through his final conversion.

In the letter sent to Rae, Sammar asks him to come for her where she is: “Here is where I am” (191). This indicates Khartoum, her home. However, once Rae visits Khartoum and is reunited with her, he proposes marriage and asks her to go back to Aberdeen with him. She finds that her sense of belonging is complete with Rae, with whom she shares emotional attachment and faith. Until then, Sammar “had not been able to substitute her country for him, anything for him” (198). Rae’s conversion and their now-shared faith and religious identity seems to be an adequate place for her to belong to. Finally, she defines her sense of belonging in religion, which is “not tied to a particular place” (198).

The novel attempts to trace the physical and spiritual journey Sammar goes through, at the end of which she realizes that the place and space to ground her identity could be anywhere, despite her physical location. Also, Rae, who experiences a spiritual journey, translates his knowledge of the Middle East and Islam into faith and thus converts to Islam. Through his journey, he learns that the spiritual path is a “lonely” one (202). However, once he reunites with Sammar and proposes to marry her, he makes of her and his newly acquired faith a place of belonging. Likewise, Sammar’s sense of belonging is not linked to any specific physical geography, but rather is one that is based on her individual religious and emotional experiences. During her journeys between Khartoum and Aberdeen, Sammar experiences physical displacement and dislocation in both settings, until she experiences the fusion of the here and there, and the now and then, in one location and temporal setting that is not defined by place but rather by a religious/spiritual and emotional geography. Movement is the trope that binds Sammar’s identity and subjectivity together, highlighting her personal religious geography that allows her to map her personal location despite the physical geography.

### ***Minaret: Religious Displacement and the Replacement of the Self***

Aboulela's second novel, *Minaret*, published in 2005, continues to explore the experience of the Muslimwoman, negotiating a religious Islamic gendered identity, social class, exile, and Western secularism and values. Najwa, the narrator and protagonist in the novel, is in exile, displaced in London after seeking political asylum after the 1985 Sudanese military coup that overthrew the government and led to her father's execution over embezzlement issues. While in London, Najwa negotiates the secular Western upbringing and identity she received and took on while living in Khartoum with her newly acquired religious sensibility and growing Islamic consciousness. While in Sudan, an Islamic country by faith, culture, and tradition, Najwa is disconnected from her religious identity due to her family's social status and Westernized lifestyle. Having experienced Islam as a tradition belonging to the servants at her household and to the Sudanese students at the university who from lower social strata than hers and her friends', she rediscovers Islam in London as a diasporic subject trying to ground her identity in a specific place. After being exiled in London, which results in the destruction of her family—her mother dies and her brother ends up a drug addict in jail—Najwa rediscovers the Islamic traditions of her home country away from home and away from the people who are linked to home. After being introduced to the community of women who come from various Islamic cultures, ethnicities, and traditions at the Regents Park Mosque in London, which becomes the place for her displaced flourishing independent Islamic subjectivity, Najwa finds her own place and space that allows the formation of her identity rooted in Islam. Najwa's religious transformation happens gradually within the London landscape: she finds a way to relocate her faith and sense of belonging, proving that faith is not rooted in a fixed geographic landscape.

Both the physical and the spiritual journey Najwa experiences are narrated in a disconnected temporal and spatial setting: Najwa's narration of her life constantly shifts between

present and past, London and Khartoum, and an older secular self and a new religious self. This discontinuity in time and place reflects and mirrors the discontinuity she experiences upon rediscovering Islam away from home, Sudan, and away from her secular Sudanese relatives and friends. It is only when she experiences displacement and detachment from home that her religious identity is rediscovered: religion becomes the place of belonging that allows her to reject Western values and thus construct an individualized Islamic identity that she can connect to. Najwa's transformation happens gradually and independently: she finally chooses responsibly to move from a Western secular subjectivity to one grounded in Islamic values detached from home, reconstructing a self she connects to positively. In this novel Aboulela seeks to provide an alternative to her protagonist's cross-cultural experience upon exile. Once displaced and then relocated in London, Najwa seeks a new sense of self and identity, connecting to the community of women at the Regents Park Mosque. This religious space becomes the place for Najwa's sense of belonging and flourishing identity.

*Minaret* is a story of the individual journey the female protagonist and narrator, Najwa, undertakes from Khartoum to London. The narrative is divided into three temporal settings: the first deals with Najwa's early years growing up in Khartoum as the privileged daughter of an upper-class Sudanese politician and businessman, living an extravagant and Western lifestyle. The second part deals with Najwa's exile in London after the destruction of her family: she has to endure a life of harsh financial circumstances that degrade her social status; she finally becomes a housekeeper, working for privileged and rich Arab migrant families in London. During this period Najwa has to navigate between her identity as a privileged woman and her identity as a fallen woman who has lost her privileged social status. Also, after coming into contact with the women at the Regents Park Mosque after her mother's death, she goes through a

state of confusion and struggle between upholding a Western secular lifestyle linked to her past in Khartoum and her newly acquired Islamic religious consciousness. It is not until she decides to cut herself from her past experiences, including her relatives and friends from back home, that a new identity starts to emerge. The third temporal setting of the novel takes place completely in post-9/11 London, after Najwa has grounded her religious identity with her strong and deep connection and devotion to the community of women at Regents Park Mosque. Najwa is aware of her gendered religious identity in London and tries to relocate herself and sense of belonging with those who share the same faith-based identities at the Mosque.

### **From Khartoum to London: Coming Down in the World and Najwa's Displaced Westernization**

Beginning with the prologue of the novel, Najwa, the narrator and protagonist, starts by expressing her present position in the world and then proceeds by narrating the story of her life back in Khartoum and her early life as an exile with her mother and brother in London. After her forced exile from her native Khartoum and the loss of her social and financial privilege, Najwa articulates the claustrophobic sense of space and place she has come to occupy: "I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room for me to move" (1). With these words Najwa starts her prologue, describing the spatial and physical position she has come to occupy in London in 2004. The movement she describes is downwards: she has "come down" and "slid" in a world and space that is "low," with barely any room for movement because of the limited amount of space she has come to occupy. We will learn later in the narrative that this place where "the ceiling is low" is the small apartment her mother has purchased for them while in exile in London after becoming poor and prior to her death from leukemia.

The expression “come down in the world” reflects how aware Najwa is of how far she has come down socially and financially upon the destruction of her family. Now in her mid-thirties, Najwa was born in Khartoum to an upper-class Sudanese family: her father originally came from a poor background but had married the daughter of a wealthy businessman who helped him establish a business and go up on the financial, political, and social ladders. Najwa, her twin brother Omar, and the family enjoyed a life of leisure: they had always spent their vacations in London and had embraced a Western lifestyle when back home in Khartoum. Najwa and her brother attended an American school in Khartoum, where they became excellent at speaking English prior to going to the University of Khartoum for their undergraduate studies. They had also lived their lives influenced by Westernization: they went to dance clubs and listened to English songs, and Najwa wore miniskirts. Also, Najwa’s father, by then a wealthy Sudanese businessman and a close friend of the Sudanese president at the time, had enjoyed drinking Western “banned whiskey,” and her mother was always busy with charity work, in addition to mingling with aristocratic families over barbeque dinners. After the 1985 military coup that brought down the Sudanese government, Najwa, her mother, and Omar were forced into exile, while their father was executed, having been accused of “corruption.” After they enjoy a life of stability due to a secure flow of money, their resources dwindle, and they are plunged into a sharply lower financial and social status. Najwa’s brother, who becomes a drug addict, ends up in prison, and her mother becomes ill from blood cancer and dies, after what had been left of money for the family has been spent on her medication.

Significantly, prior to introducing her past in Khartoum, her present life, her plunge “down in the world,” Najwa continues to describe her present situation and the coping mechanism and survival strategy she follows so that she can accept her fallen social status:

Most of the time I'm used to it. Most of the time I'm good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back. But sometimes a shift makes me remember. Routine is ruffled and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I've become, standing in a street covered with autumn leaves. The trees in the park across the road are scrubbed silver and brass. I look up and see the minaret of Regent's Park Mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn. [...] Now it is at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent. (1)

Najwa accepts the loss in financial and social status, as it is forced upon her, and she has no power to change it, since her past is what has determined it. Yet, whenever Najwa experiences a new beginning in her present life—as when she begins work as a maid at an Egyptian women's household—she recalls the past that has led to this life. In contrast to the downward movement she has suffered in London, she turns her gaze upwards, where the minaret of the Regents Park Mosque comes into view. The appearance of this minaret as she looks up marks a shift in Najwa's mood from being bored by her routine yet resigned to it, to excitedly describing the beauty of the London landscape in autumn. In this season, London is “at its best,” just like a mature potent woman. The parallel Najwa makes between London in the autumn and a mature woman seems to mirror Najwa herself: a mature woman in her mid-thirties at the moment, who has come down in the world yet still feels strong and potent because of her reconnection to her Islamic faith, which gives her a strong sense of belonging and identity. The minaret that appears before Najwa's upturned eyes will be the means for her survival: she will finally connect to the community of women at the same mosque that hosts this minaret. Furthermore, even though she accepts that she has come down in the world due to her being ill equipped to successfully change her social and financial status, without the education and experience needed to land a well-paying job, her renewed spirituality will become the place for her survival. While she has lost her social, financial and national identity, her religious identity is what gives her a sense of self and subjectivity. In addition, her sense of community and solidarity with the women at the Regents



Park Mosque, who come from different ethnicities and social backgrounds, will provide her with a collective sense of identity and belonging that will help her cope with the loss of her social status and national identity.

Through the trope of memory, Najwa constantly shifts in time and place between the two landscapes that have shaped her identity, from 1985 until her present life in 2004. She uses memory and links it to her temporal and physical movement in the narrative as a strategy to make sense of her family's destruction and what led her to change radically in terms of identity and character. During this textual and narrative movement back and forth, we are introduced to Najwa prior to her and after her exile: "one life literally stops, replaced by a completely different one" (Cariello 340). From the start, we are introduced to a Najwa who is totally different from the Najwa we encounter in London upon the downfall of her family and the poverty she is plunged into. The Najwa we are introduced to in Khartoum is solely defined by her social status, which gave her the privilege of obtaining a Western education at the American School and a Western lifestyle, a type of life the children of upper-class families enjoyed in the Khartoum of the 1980s. Khartoum, the place where Najwa was born and raised, is where her family enjoyed a life of lavish expenditure, leisure, and privilege; this lifestyle will become the primary reason for their destruction.

Najwa's life in Khartoum is defined almost totally by her social class: her socio-economic background is what shapes her life, the way she views people, and the way she perceives the world around her. When introducing her father in the narrative, Najwa describes him in terms of his social position and tells us about how she feels about it: "He had married above himself, to better himself. His life story was of how he moved from a humble background to become manager of the president's office via marriage into an old wealthy family. I didn't like

him to tell it, it confused me. I was too much like my mother” (Aboulela 8). Najwa, who from the start enjoys the life of riches and privilege, was not sympathetic to her father’s struggle to take himself up the social ladder. Not only does she not feel comfortable hearing her father tell his story, she is oblivious to his experience and does not want to hear about it. Being born into the upper class is the only identification Najwa wants to acknowledge. When Najwa continues the conversation with her father expressing how she could not identify with his life story, he replies, “Spoilt, [...] the three of you are spoilt” (8). Najwa notices that her father is pensive when he utters those words, as if he can foretell that his family will not be able to shoulder responsibility in case they encounter hardships because they have always been born into economic privilege and have not worked for it. It is important to note that when Najwa narrates parts of her past, she selects them carefully, so as to have them foreshadow the later events that will take place in her life. Significantly, the parts from her past that she brings up foreshadow the destruction that her family will later experience and her coming down in the world.

Furthermore, Najwa’s awareness of her social class and privilege is reflected in her everyday life, especially when she takes the car to the university, unlike other girls in Khartoum and reflects, “Was I not an emancipated young woman driving her car to university? In Khartoum only a minority of women drove cars and in university less than thirty per cent of students were girls—that should make me feel good about myself” (10) Najwa’s definition of “emancipation” is linked directly to her economic status: this privilege is also linked directly to her social freedom as a woman in Khartoum. Due to her class, Najwa’s social and gendered experiences set her apart from the underprivileged girls in Khartoum who cannot afford a car of their own, nor do they have the social freedoms she has as a girl brought up in a Western lifestyle. The consciousness she displays regarding her privileged class position in society is

superficial and reflects a level of vanity in her character that will later on contribute to her inability to successfully survive in exile. However, after reflecting on her privileged position, she mentions that she would prefer to be driven by her brother Omar. Her lack of confidence that she can be fully independent is a theme that will continue to appear during her life in Khartoum.

As Najwa is at the university near the library, she passes two girls from the class she is about to attend who are smiling at each other. Sammar, who is totally conscious of the class difference between them and herself, justifies herself for not having a friendship with them:

They were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason we were not friends. With them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes; my too-short skirts and too-tight blouses. Many girls made me feel awkward. I was conscious of their modest grace, of the tobés that covered their slimness—pure white cotton covering their arms and hair. (14)

Najwa is conscious of the class distinction that separates her from other women in Khartoum, especially those who come from villages and towns, as opposed to her urbanized, Western upbringing. The highlight of the distinctions that stand out is the difference in dress code: Najwa's Western dress style reflects her Western influence and upbringing due to her social status, whereas the hijab and tobe the girls from the province don is linked to their traditional, rural upbringing. While in Khartoum, Najwa links the Islamic dress codes to a lower social class and the traditional part of the Sudanese culture, which she has been detached from due to her family's upper social class. These social and religious distinctions are the reason Najwa does not form friendships with the girls. Later in the narrative, when Najwa is in exile in London, she reconnects to Islam and the Islamic dress code as she adopts a faith-based identity and connects to the Muslim community of women in their various ethnic and social classes at the Regents Park Mosque.

Najwa's brother, Omar, is also immersed in the Western lifestyle: he drinks alcohol, does drugs, goes to the American nightclub to dance to English popular songs, spends vacations with the family in London, and has decided that when he is done with school, he will move to London permanently. Najwa describes how Omar perceives the West: "Omar, who associates the West with modern and advanced civilizations 'believed we had been better off under the British and it was a shame that they left'" (12). Even though Najwa is immersed in a Western lifestyle, she still cringes that her brother embraces colonialism. However, Najwa remains attached to the Westernization that is associated to her social class in Khartoum and never thinks that she would want to move away from Sudan to live in London, whereas Omar wishes he could leave for London to study there if only his grades at school were not so low they prevent him from going away. When Najwa's father asks her if she is interested in leaving to study abroad in London, she refuses, and Omar sarcastically accuses her of being "over patriotic" (17).

At the University of Khartoum, Najwa becomes acquainted with Anwar and falls in love with him despite the social, economic and ideological differences between them. Unlike Najwa and her friends from her socio-economic class, Anwar despises "Western music" and "Western ways" (25). Anwar, a leftist in his political views, is a student of political science and constantly criticizes the government at university rallies and gatherings. He calls for the downfall of the government because of its rampant corruption and advocates holding it accountable for the growing disparity between the social classes caused by that corruption. At times, Anwar even mentions Najwa's father's name as a businessman and political figure complicit with the corruption of the government. Najwa, after falling in love with Anwar despite his opposition to her father and the government, is warned by her mother to stay away from such a relationship. During the last a couple of days she is still in Khartoum, oblivious to the calamity that will strike

the Sudanese government and consequently her family, Najwa cuts off her relationship with Anwar due to her mother's pressure. Later in the narrative Najwa will reconnect with Anwar in London and attempt to reconstruct her romantic relationship with him and pay for his graduate studies, only to discover that as Anwar was not sympathetic towards her family before they were exiled to London, he will continue to contribute to her "falling down in the world" status.

Significantly, Najwa does embrace the Western lifestyle while in Khartoum, yet she feels an element lacking in her life, a void inside her. She constantly feels that her privileged socio-economic class does not seem to fully complete her sense of happiness and security, and at a certain point she contemplates her life:

A happy life. My father and mother loved me and were always generous. In the summer we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn't have, couldn't have. No dreams corroded in rust, no buried desires. And yet, sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed, sadness like a forgotten dream. (15)

This unsettling sense of lack will be translated eventually into an awareness that her privileged life and elitist social class are not enough to give her a full sense of self, subjectivity, and identity. On the eve of the 1984 coup, Najwa's father is arrested, while she, her mother, and Omar are secretly transferred out of the country and forced into exile in London, which will become their permanent place of exile after her father is tried in court and executed for embezzlement and corruption. The traumatic experience of being forced out of Khartoum and losing her social and economic privilege in addition to her national identity will continue to haunt Najwa until she connects to the community of women and the Regents Park mosque and grounds a faith-based identity that she independently chooses to identify with and by.

During the first weeks of Najwa's and her family's political asylum, they maintain a life of privilege, lavishly spending money and enjoying their lives like tourists in London, until

eventually their bank accounts started to dwindle. Najwa, her mother, and her brother are oblivious at the beginning to the atrocity that will befall their family. Najwa says that the “first weeks in London were OK. We didn’t even notice that we were falling. Once we got over the shock of suddenly having to fly out the day after Baba was arrested, Omar and I could not help but enjoy London” (56). However, after Najwa’s father is tried, his bank accounts and assets in the country are frozen, leaving the family with less to live off of. Omar, who has become a drug addict, forces his mother to give him massive amounts of money, until eventually he is imprisoned for trying to stab a police officer, who arrests him for possessing drugs. Najwa’s mother is diagnosed with blood cancer, and her treatment costs them a massive fortune. Unable to afford all the medical expenses, Najwa and her mother sell the Lancaster Gate flat they have owned for years and buy a smaller one they can afford. However, her mother’s health deteriorates, and eventually she dies, leaving Najwa all alone, cut off from her previous life and all the privilege associated with it. At this moment, Najwa feels downtrodden and that she has come down in the world.

Not only is Najwa cut off from her family suddenly, she also is mistreated by her relatives. Her uncle’s wife, Eva, who instead of helping Najwa obtain a respectful job turns her into her housemaid and even pays her less than what she would regularly earn for the same job elsewhere. Najwa’s cousin, Sameer, cuts relationships with her and her brother, since he turns out to be more successful socially, economically, and academically. The way Najwa’s relatives treat her on the basis of their socio-economic privilege while in exile mirrors her previous unsympathetic treatment of those who were from a lower social class than hers back in Khartoum. In London, Najwa becomes the underprivileged among other Sudanese relatives and

friends from her past, and thus their treatment of her differs on the basis of social and economic status.

The last person Najwa reconnects with from her life back in Sudan is Anwar, and for a short while their romantic relationship is revived. Anwar, who was in support of the first 1984 military coup in Sudan, was forced into exile after a political party opposed to the one he supported staged a successful coup. Anwar's presence in Najwa's life provides the only attachment she has to her past and home. Both Najwa and Anwar have been reduced to a state of homelessness by being forced out of their homeland and thus have constantly felt a sense of loss: unsettlement defines their recent state of existence:

“What's wrong with us Africans?” I asked Anwar and he knew. He knew facts and history. But nothing he said gave me comfort or hope. The more he talked, the more confused I felt, groping for something simple. Everything was complicated, everything was connected to history and economics. In Queensway, in High Street Kensington, we would watch the English, the Gulf Arabs, the Spanish, Japanese, Malaysians, Americans and wonder how it would feel to have, like them, a stable country. A place where we could make future plans and it wouldn't matter who the government was... A country that was a familiar, reassuring background, a static landscape on which to paint dreams. (165)

While Anwar knows facts that, at least, ground his knowledge in what exactly reduced him to this state of exile, it seems that Najwa has no clue of why and how she has come to this state. Her upbringing has not prepared her for this life of exile: she has not ever been independent, nor does she have the qualifications that will help her survive in London. She feels unsettled, rootless, and suffers the anxiety of not being able to build a future of her own, having been deprived of home for good. The loss of country for Najwa is linked to her sense of having lost her identity. When she tells Anwar that in London, while working for her aunt Eva, she has earned a twenty-pound note during Christmas, he laughs, then remarks, “So you're now celebrating Christmas. You've become a true citizen of London” (150). Nawaj replies back, “I

don't know what I'm becoming" (151). Najwa is aware that her life in London is transforming her identity somehow; however, she remains clueless as to who she is becoming in the absence of a stable sense of belonging and home. However, she continues to express to Anwar her sense of alienation and displacement in the London landscape.

Once her sense of belonging is shattered, Najwa's identity is shattered along with it. At a certain point, Najwa compares the sense of displacement she suffers while in London with the sense of belonging Londoners feel in their own city and country and envies them, saying, "I disliked London and envied the English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused" (174). As opposed to her own unstable country, which has been experiencing political unrest, England is stable and remains a stable home for the people who belong to it. Despite the secular outlook and worldview she has been brought up with, she does not feel like she belongs to London, since she still feels a sense of alienation, loss, and detachment from her surroundings. It is not her worldview or lifestyle in London that will give her a sense of belonging.

However, Najwa's relationship with Anwar develops and becomes stronger, since he provides her with a sense of belonging. At a certain point, Najwa starts visiting Anwar at his London apartment, which he shares with two other Sudanese students. Anwar and his roommates are in London temporarily, unlike Najwa, who has lost hope of returning ever to her homeland.

However, Najwa enjoys being at Anwar's apartment, which becomes a site for her to get in touch with her Sudanese identity, since it is a place that provides her with a sense of cultural familiarity and security. Like Najwa, one of Anwar's roommates is from an upper-class, Westernized home in Khartoum. When Najwa meets him, she likes him right away, since he reminds her of friends from back home, except that he is a communist like Anwar. Anwar's apartment becomes a place of identity negotiation for Najwa, especially when Anwar and his roommates start talking about



politics and religion. At a certain point, Najwa realizes that when Anwar and his roommates discuss Sudanese politics, she is mostly interested. However, when they discuss Islam and religion she is offended; not only because it is part of the traditions and culture that belong back in Sudan but also because she has started feeling it as an element lacking in her identity. While Najwa is playing cards with Anwar and his friends, Ameen, one of Anwar's Westernized roommates, mentions that he has to leave because he has been invited over to a relative's home for a Ramadan breakfast. Najwa is shocked. Even in a location and place in which she feels at home, Najwa feels that if she not know that the month of Ramadan has started she has lost the sense of time. When she expresses how important it is for her to know when Ramadan starts, since it is an Islamic practice that she performs, Anwar and his roommates laugh sarcastically at her because they have always thought of her as "Westernized" and "detached from Sudanese traditions" (230). At that moment, Najwa feels as if she is "all alone." From that point on, Najwa starts feeling a sense of loneliness and emptiness even in the company of Anwar and his Sudanese roommates.

Eventually, Najwa, who has built up hopes that Anwar will marry her, is crushed when she realizes that he never intended to propose to her, since he would not want his children to have her father's blood. After paying for his graduate studies, Najwa feels cheated by him and every other Sudanese person she has been in contact with while exiled in London. She is shattered by the hostility she is treated with by the people she one day felt part of during her upbringing in Khartoum. The social hypocrisy they have displayed after she has come down in the world and lost her social and economic status is a part of her past identity that she no longer identifies with. The final connection Najwa keeps with Khartoum and with her past is her relationship with Anwar, but after he refuses to propose to her, Najwa feels further displaced and

confused. It is during the Muslim month of Ramadan, which Najwa previously associated with the culture and tradition of home, that Najwa becomes disturbed; she has not noticed that it has started because Anwar, whom she was busy with, does not observe it. Najwa's sense of guilt drives her to the Regents Park Mosque, where she will try to connect with a community that will help her in become grounded in time and place and perhaps give her the sense of belonging and identity that she has been longing to gain in diasporic London.

Najwa's search for the Regents Park Mosque, after she has been totally cut off from her family, relatives, and friends and realized the impossibility of her return to Khartoum, indicates that she will no longer attempt to connect or reconnect with the past, as she has failed to do so previously. She realizes that reconstructing the past will not restore to her the same sense of security, belonging, and social life she once had in Khartoum. Thus, her only option is to learn how to separate both her past from her present, Khartoum from London, her old self from her new self, in order to emerge with a stronger sense of selfhood and identity in the diasporic landscape. From this point on, Najwa will negotiate the space provided to her in the Regents Park Mosque with that of the larger and general London landscape in order to ground her identity in a specific location, enjoy a sense of coherent selfhood, reconstruct a sense of home, and eventually belong. The Regents Park Mosque will provide her with a solid location to belong to, and thus Najwa will negotiate her identity in relation to the individual identities of the multi-ethnic Muslim women whom she meets at the mosque in order to construct an individualized, personal identity and subjectivity with a Muslim identification base.

### **The Regents Park Mosque and the Reconstruction of Self**

Najwa finds the site, place, and space of belonging and rootedness that parallels her sense of belonging at home: “In the mosque I feel like I’m in Khartoum again” (240). The mosque becomes a secure space in which Najwa becomes comfortable enough to negotiate her sense of self and identity. Finding the mosque and feeling a sense of belonging to it helps her cope with the painful reality of uprootedness and the sense of loss of social and national belonging. Commenting on Najwa’s explicit “re-Islamisation” by donning the hijab and connecting herself to the mosque, replacing the sense of dislocation in London, with a sense of belonging, Olivier Roy highlights her act as one related to the need to physically demonstrate her newly acquired sense of belonging.

Re-Islamisation means that Muslim identity, self-evident so long as it belonged to an inherited cultural legacy, has to express itself explicitly in a non-Muslim or Western context. The construction of a ‘deculturalised’ Islam is a means of experiencing a religious identity that is not linked to a given culture and can therefore fit with every culture, or, more precisely, could be defined beyond the very notion of culture. (Roy qtd. in Nash 144)

It is the very fact that Najwa has rediscovered Islam as a faith in England and not in Khartoum that marks her “re-Islamisation,” a process that is not based on religious practices that are connected to a specific culture. Also, even when this mere act of “re-Islamisation” gives her a sense of belonging and invokes a nostalgic sentiment that reminds her of home, it remains one that she will acquire among the multi-ethnic women at the Regents Park Mosque .

Being at the mosque gives Najwa a sense of nostalgic belonging; as she is waiting for the time of prayer, she daydreams about home:

I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am small back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, [and] a quiet room to rest in. (Aboulela 74-75)

It is the religious space of the woman's corner in London that allows Najwa to transcend her present and reconnect to the times when her life was quiet and peaceful. To conjure up images of her family home in Khartoum is the closest Najwa can get to reconnecting to her past, because for so long she could manage to deal with "a fractured country but not a broken home" (165). Najwa's connection to mosque becomes a way to collect her own self, which she feels was fractured after both country and home were broken, and to rebuild a sense of a coherent existence and belonging. Thus the mosque becomes the site that provides Najwa with the home, family, and community she has lost.

Spending time at the mosque and mingling with women from different age groups, ethnicities, social classes, and degrees of religiosity provides Najwa with a site for identity negotiation and self-realization. As she observes the younger Muslim girls at the mosque, Najwa realizes that their experience with Islam is and will be totally different from her own, since she did not experience it until later in her life as a religion to practice and a faith, and also because she is a first-generation immigrant in London:

Usually the young Muslim girls who have been born and brought up in Britain puzzle me, though I admire them. I always find myself trying to understand them. They strike me as being very British, very much at home in London. Some of them wear hijab, some don't. They have individuality and an outspokenness I didn't have when I was their age, but they lack the preciousness and glamour we girls in Khartoum had. (77)

Najwa's experience with London as a landscape of belonging and Islam as a religion to be practiced differs from the experience of those second-generation Muslim women who have been both born and raised as both English, despite their family's ethnic background, and Muslim. While observing these diverse groups of younger Muslim women at the mosque, Najwa realizes that Muslim women are diverse; for example, some wear the Islamic head covering, while others do not, proving their personal and individualized ways of approaching faith and practicing it.

Now that Najwa reconnects to Islam in London, she will have to negotiate this space of religion and the general diasporic space she is located in.

Moreover, at the women's corner at the mosque, Najwa faces incidents in which she will have to negotiate her place and stance from religion and ground herself in the religious knowledge she already has or is learning when attending debates and discussions. Not only that, Najwa finds herself having to negotiate her knowledge and identity against the other women who like discussing religion and giving their own opinions:

But I become fragmented and deflated in discussions; I never know which point of view I support. I find myself agreeing with whoever is speaking or the one I like best. And I become anxious that someone's feelings will get hurt, or worse take serious offence, as sometimes happens, and stop coming to the mosque. (79)

This sense of fragmentation Najwa feels at the mosque and between the Muslim women who display a strong sense of grounded Islamic identity and belonging is similar to the feeling she gets when observing those people from London who completely belong to the city, as they are "grounded, never displaced, never confused" (174). As Najwa attends further lessons and enters into a variety of discussion with the women at the mosque, she starts realizing her identity and identifying her voice among them. While out in London, Najwa is harassed by a group of men at the bus station who are annoyed at the sight of her hijab, identifying her as a Muslim woman, and her sense of dislocation and exclusion from the wider London landscape grows. But she will feel a sense of inclusion at the mosque as she negotiates her personal position and place among the community of women. Najwa finds that the women at the mosque provide her with a sense of security and direction as she starts constructing her personal relationship with Islam and the knowledge she piece by piece starts acquiring.

My guides chose me; I did not choose them. Sometimes I would stop and think what was I doing in this woman's car, what was I doing in her house, who gave me this book to

read. The words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it. Refresh my memory. Teach me something old. Shock me. Comfort me. Tell me what will happen in the future, what happened in the past. Explain to me. Explain to me why I am here, what am I doing. Explain to me why I came down in the world. Was it natural, was it curable? (240)

The women at the mosque provide her with a sense of solidarity and with a community to negotiate her religious experience with and against. Even though Najwa's religious awakening happens suddenly, her religious identity is acquired gradually, as she goes through the process of negotiation and identification with Islam.

Furthermore, the mosque is not a place where only faith is strongly grounded; it is constructed by Aboulela as a site for the negotiation of social, class and ethnic identity. Where Najwa once socialized and identified herself with friends and relatives who were members of the upper-class, Westernized elite in Khartoum, social hierarchy, class, and ethnicity are not the bases for the social relationships that develop between Najwa and the rest of the women at the mosque. The former identifications are insignificant when Najwa interacts with the other women. Both Wafaa, who is from Arab origins and married to an English convert, and Shahinaz, a Muslim from South Asia, provide Najwa with support and enforce her sense of inclusion among the women from various backgrounds. The variety of experiences these Muslim women have had gives Najwa a sense of individuality and personal religious identity, as she identifies with the larger Muslim community of women. In his book chapter, "Leila Aboulela: Islam and Globalization," Geoffrey Nash describes Najwa's religious identity negotiation as the following:

[It is] indicative of a modern globalized environment in that she makes an individual choice in becoming a born-again Muslim. In the process not only does she reject the secular values of a westernized world that stretches from London to Khartoum, she adopts a position that is conscious riposte to these. [...] But she uses this experience in London to embrace a religiosity that emphasizes personal behavior over culture and politics. (Nash 146)

Najwa's growing religious identity after connecting to the community of women at the Regents Park Mosque reminds her of how she was intrigued by the practicing Muslim students at Khartoum University:

I reached out for something new. I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realized this was what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University. This was what I had envied in our gardener reciting the Qur'an, our servants who woke up at dawn. Now when I hear the Qur'an recited, there wasn't bleakness in me or numbness, instead I listened and I was alert. (Aboulela 243)

It is not Najwa's religious nostalgia for the body of practicing Muslim students back in Khartoum or the servants at her home that lead her to construct her own religious identity, but rather the community of practicing Muslims has always created in her a sense of internalized anguish. Najwa's connection to Islam as her faith and a basis for her identity comes from her desire to connect to it on a personal basis.

The last site of identity negotiation and identification for Najwa is when she starts working for Lamya, an Egyptian PhD student, who is in London with her brother Tamer, an undergraduate student. While working at Lamya's place, Najwa forges a strong relationship with Tamer due to the shared religious sense of identity the two uphold. However, Najwa's relationship with Lamya is more antagonistic than friendly: Lamya lives a Western lifestyle and mixes with Arab girls from her same class, while dismissing Najwa on the basis of her inferior class and social identification. Interestingly, Aboulela constructs the character of Lamya to parallel Najwa's old self in order to represent how far Najwa has come in the process of religious and identity negotiation. However, Najwa identifies with Tamer, who is almost the only member in his family who practices Islam as a religion and faith. While Najwa is talking to Tamer about

his life and upbringing, they get into a conversation about their identities and how they identify themselves:

“My education is Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don’t feel very Sudanese, though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity. What about you?” I talk slowly. “I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I’ve changed. And now like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim.” (110)

Just like Najwa, Tamer bases his identity on his faith. He finds that Islam provides him with a sense of location and belonging against the backdrop of his exposure to a Western lifestyle and education. When Najwa asks Tamer about Lamya and how she views her identity, he answers, “I guess she thinks of herself as Arab” (110). It becomes clear that while Aboulela connects Najwa to the women at the mosque, who offer her a sense of solidarity and belonging, her identification with them is based more on religion than on gender. Further, to have Najwa and Tamer experience similar identity identification while Lamya’s identity takes a different route reflects the fact that Aboulela did not intend Najwa’s journey to be one based on gender and a sole sense of Islamic feminism. Rather, Najwa’s journey is not ideology ridden or one dimensional; it is toward achieving a nuanced, personalized, and individualized sense of faith that grounds her in a location she calls home. Najwa’s identity is multi-layered: she goes through social, class, political, and religious negotiation in order to form an identity of her own construction.



## **Conclusion: The Poetics of Journey**

This dissertation explores the ways in which Arab woman writers reclaim their narratives and the narratives of their female protagonists by employing the trope of journey, which involves various types of movement, mobility, and travel, as a means to explore their complex heterogeneous subjectivities. In particular, journey serves as a trope of female agency: it allows these women to contest any notion of a fixed, unilateral subjectivity, and it allows them to map personal geographies that are uniquely personal and individually hybrid. In this, these women construct in-between imaginative and physical spaces that allow their multiple subjectivities to flourish and new concepts of belonging and of home to emerge. These constructed in-between spaces and the heterogeneous subjectivities of Arab women they incubate become sites that register moments of empowerment. In other words, the trope of movement and travel provides a strategy for inscribing the gendered negotiations of the multiple identities that may emerge from such movement and narrate the complexities faced by these women during identity formation. Movement across borders, identities, and narratives are among the tropes this dissertation has highlighted and investigated. It is imperative that people understand the multiple ways movement and travel is fleshed out in these selected literary texts and how each, in its own way, destabilizes any attempt to represent the identities of Arab women and the spaces of belonging they construct and inhabit as stable, coherent entities; rather, emphasizes the heterogeneous subjectivities of these women.

In the primary texts analyzed in this study, Samman's *Beirut 75* and *The Body is a Traveling Suitcase*, Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, and Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*, the trope of journey in its various types allows self representation, the translation of place, cultural translation, and identity negotiation. It is precisely the articulation of movement in its

various forms and the space it produces in these narratives that allow the negotiation of identity, selfhood, and individuality. All the narratives in this study tell stories of dislocation, both physical and spatial, ones that involve various kinds of motion that empower female protagonists to search and locate their identity in a place of their own choice. The mere movement implied in the journey trope becomes a site for challenging, transforming, deconstructing, constructing, and reconstructing individual discourses about Arab women identities and their experiences.

Chapter one analyzes the representation of the tropes of flight and departure from the socio-economic limitations governing Arab women's lives and mobility during the mid 1970s in Ghada Samman's novel, *Beirut 75*, and in her travelogue, *The Body is a Traveling Suitcase*. The mere movement and travel that occurs in the narrative/travelogue is an initial step to opening the doors for Yasmeeena and Samman to assert their individual agency. Yet it is important to note that the aimless wandering of the protagonist/persona in the two works represents moments of feminist consciousness and recognition of the limitations of the socio-economic gendered status quo that keeps such women aimlessly wandering without arriving at a better alternative that is accepted by their respective societies and governments.

Chapter two makes a connection between the trope of journey as the process of moving from one place to another, and Asya's act of reclaiming her narrative by speaking for herself, her desires, and her personal choices. Also, this chapter explores how the upper social class Asya is born into in Cairo, the theoretic space of the Mezzaterra, is characterized by a fluid cultural hybrid exchange and mix with European (particularly English) cultures that initially marks her hybridity. I argue that being born into such a hybrid social class in Egypt makes Asya susceptible to her later cross-cultural experiences, where she does not valorize one culture she lives in over the other, nor does she evaluate them against each other.

Asya's Anglo-Arab encounter, as Edward Said terms it, is one that defines her identity; it is only when Asya manages to reclaim her individual agency by constructing a personal, hybrid life that accepts the paradoxes of her Egyptian and English experience that she is able to define herself. Asya does not attempt to resolve the paradoxes and conflicts she obtains from experiencing Egypt and England, but rather she tries to negotiate a common imaginary space to translate herself into. It is the trope of journey and social mobility that allows Asya's personal hybrid identity to constantly engage in the act of translating itself in the different places she occupies, as well as translating the places she comes into contact with.

Chapter three underscores how Leila Aboulela employs the trope of translation as transfer and movement between the original homeland (Sudan) and the host lands (Scotland and England) her protagonists experience in an attempt to engage and negotiate the Muslimwoman experience in the West. Aboulela defines an agency that negotiates the concept of the Muslimwoman in her selected narratives through portraying the gendered, complex individual journeys her female protagonists experience and how they ground it in their renewed faith experience. Aboulela's female protagonists challenge any essentialist and reductionist labeling of their characters, even when finally assuming a gendered, Islamic faith-based identity. During their cross-cultural experiences, both protagonists, Sammar and Najwa, represent and refute the concept of the Muslimwoman in the sense that they negotiate it against their cross-cultural, diverse, yet individual nuanced experiences.

These authors present singular, personal, and individual experiences undertaken in gendered geographic, emotional, and metaphorical journeys toward self-discovery and actualization. It is this journey experience in the singular that allows the space for their heterogeneous subjectivities to emerge. Thematically, these texts' exploration of journey and its

relationship to self-representation, cultural translation, and the politics of identity negotiation highlight the importance of the representation of the individual lives of diasporic subjects. Accordingly, the three authors construct the lives of their protagonists/persona in the selected works in an intensely individual manner: their protagonists are not representative figures of anybody but themselves (except for Yasmeena when Samman links her sexual deprivation to the deprivation of other Arab women across the centuries, constructing her as a representative figure in that particular manner). In this sense, the authors are very careful when representing the experiences of their female protagonists; they remain opposed to the homogenization of the experience of Arab women. The texts present individuals and their personal struggles such as to make space for their desires, a strategy that enables them to avoid being squeezed into a singular identity, place, space, discourse, and worldview.

This dissertation aims at participating in the ongoing literary scholarship on Arab literature produced by women. By analyzing literary works by and about Arab women through the journey trope, this dissertation underscores the specificities of the singular experiences of individuals represented in literary works without trying to connect these narratives to a general collective discourse. What is unique about these selected literary texts is not that the struggles highlighted are predominantly between orientalist and neo-orientalist post-9/11 Western discourses, which constantly reduce women's experiences to a singular narrative of passive victimization, nor are they against traditional patriarchal discourses in Arab societies, which historically have reduced women to the private sphere. Rather, the struggles presented in the texts are mainly connected to how to assert an individuality and personal specific subjectivity in a reality that mostly defines Arab women according to the aforementioned competing discourses. Essentially, these authors in their literary representations create unique narratives that

acknowledge individuality and personal experiences while navigating between imposed discourses.

It remains important to note that during the analysis of the selected literary works, I have not attempted to define them all according to a monolithic theoretical framework and discourse, including Arab feminism and its different strands (secular and Islamic), due to the diversity of visions they present. In doing so, this dissertation stresses the importance of viewing each work on its own and how it engages the particular socio-historic and politics of its writers' milieu, while being open to different theoretical approaches. I have made use of an eclectic assortment of travel theories when analyzing Samman's *The Body is a Traveling Suitcase* to show the psychological implication of journey and how movement affects the traveling subject's perception of both home and foreign lands and how that experience affects the perception of one's own identity. Also, postcolonial theory and its various manifestations specifically informed my reading of Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*. Bhabha's theorization on hybridity and the "third space" of identity articulation highlights Asya's Anglo-Arab encounter as a site of hybridization. In addition, I have applied some aspects of Arab secular feminism in my approach to Asya's personal gendered development both in Egypt and in England; in both places her secularism is grounded in the spirit of the Nasserite era, his pan-Arabist paradigm, and the social class her family belongs to.

Furthermore, theories on Muslim feminism that engage Islamic discourse have been informative in my approach to Aboulela's works, *The Translator* and *Minaret*. Specifically, since Aboulela's works underscore the Muslim Anglo-Arab encounter, Cooke's theories of the Muslimwoman informed my analysis of how Aboulela clashes, engages, and negotiates this hyphenated gender- and faith-based identity in diasporic settings.

At this point in my research on this subject, I contend that the significance of reading Arab women's literary narratives through the trope of journey in its various types of movement offers a fresh approach to understanding the diversity, heterogeneity, and pluralism of presenting Arab women's experiences. Also, the trope of journey acknowledges the geographic diversity of these women's locations and the way it enriches their multiple subjectivities and marks them differently. Most importantly, the trope of journey addresses singular journeys without attempting to link them to any collective experience, allowing these Arab women to map their personal geographies and to some degree carve personal identities defined not by hegemonic discourses but rather by their individual struggles toward achieving agency and reclaiming their own narratives. It remains important to note that the trope of journey facilitates cross-cultural encounters: it offers a common ground for a constructive dialogue and debate between different cultures, locations, and identities.

The trope of journey conceptualizes the experience of Arab women in literary representation by recognizing an open-ended possibility of experiences, agencies, and narratives. In my future research on this topic, I would be particularly interested in a comparative study that brings together contemporary narratives produced by Arab women upon their Anglo-Arab encounter, specifically the Arab-American encounter in the post-9/11 era. I would like to compare the way Arab women writers represent female subjectivities and agencies upon interacting with a landscape saturated with both fear and hope for the possibilities of communication and positive interaction. It is quite important to investigate the representation of this particular gendered Arab-American encounter, which will illuminate the important role Arab women literary writers play in reshaping discourses, both home and abroad, about their own experiences and subjectivities.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> According to Nabulsi, Ghada Samman's departure to Beirut was an initial step to set her foot on a life of travelling. Nabulsi is the first to call Samman a Sinbad due to her adaptation of travel as a lifestyle. (9-11)

<sup>ii</sup> *Rihla* means a journey, voyage, travel; also a travelogue. *Rihlat* is the plural of *rihla*. See *Encyclopaedia of Islam online, second edition*.

<sup>iii</sup> *Muallaqat* are collection of seven pre-Islamic Arabic *qaṣīdahs* (odes), each considered to be its author's best piece. Since the authors themselves are among the dozen or so most famous poets of the 6th century, the selection enjoys a unique position in Arabic literature, representing the finest of early Arabic poetry. "Al-Mu'allaqat". *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*.

Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2012. Web. 15 Jun. 2012

<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/395740/Al-Muallaqat>>.

<sup>iv</sup> The conventional pre-Islamic *qasida* has three integral parts: the *nasib*, the *rahil*, and the *fakhr*. For the definition of each part of the *qasida* and its significance, check Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>v</sup> Antara was among a group of pre-Islamic poets, including Salik bin Amir al-Sa'adi and Khaffaf bin Umar al-Sharidi, who were of mixed Arab and African blood; they were called *al-Agharibah al-Arab*, the Arab Ravens. These poets were outcasts from their own societies due to the social status of their mothers. They have expressed their bitterness toward being cast out by their own people in their poetry. Check Jawad Ali's book *The Detailed History of the Arabs Before Islam*, 1972.

<sup>vi</sup> The hajj is one of the five pillars of the Islamic faith. It refers to the annual pilgrimage of Muslims to the Ka'ba in Mecca, in the Arabian Peninsula, modern-day Saudi Arabia.

<sup>vii</sup> Talab al-Ilm, meaning the search for knowledge. Travel in search of knowledge is stressed in Islam.

<sup>viii</sup> For a comprehensive study of the Moroccan and Andalusian travel narratives in Arabic literature and history, see Awatif Nawwab's book written in Arabic, *الرحلات المغربية والأندلسية: مصدر من مصادر تاريخ الحجاز في القرنين السابع و الثامن الهجريين*.

<sup>ix</sup> To further explore Taha Husayn's life, check his autobiography, written in three parts, entitled *The Days*.

<sup>x</sup> Mike Velez makes a parallel between the use of North or West and South or East when critically analyzing Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. He proposes that Saleh's use of the dichotomy North-South is interchangeable with the usual use of East-West; the North or West

represents Europe and its colonial legacy, connoting power, civilization, knowledge, enlightenment, and South or East represents the areas that were subjected to colonial rule, connoting weakness, savagery, ignorance, and darkness. Check Velez' article, "On the Borderline between the Shore: Space and Place in *Season of Migration to the North*." West Chester University Audience, 2012.

<sup>xi</sup> Gina Eleni reads *Season of Migration to the North* as a national allegory. Check her article, "*Season of Migration to the North* as a National Allegory."

<sup>xii</sup> Huda Sha'rawi's memoir in Arabic is entitled, *Mudhakkirati* (1981). The memoir has been translated to English by Margot Badran as *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist* (1986). The translation and publication of the memoir in English has been criticized for being affected by the politics of reception of works by Arab women in the First World, thus containing distortions of the original text that educators and students must be aware of when reading the translated text. For a critical analysis of the politics of reception of *Harem Years*, check Professor Mohja Kahf's article, "Packaging 'Huda': Sha'rawi's Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment."

<sup>xiii</sup> Toukan's *A Mountainous Journey* was translated into English in 1990 by Olive Kenny. This translation has been criticized by literary critic Nawar al-Hassan Golley for containing distorted, mistranslated, and flawed translations that affect the meaning intended by the author. Check Golley's chapter, "Fadwa Tuqan's *Mountainous Journey, Difficult Journey*," in *Reading Arab Women's Autobiography: Shahrazad Tells Her Story* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

<sup>xiv</sup> I explain in chapter one of this dissertation why Samman's departure to Europe without obtaining governmental permission was problematic.

<sup>xv</sup> George El-Hage reads *Beirut 75* as an autobiographical work. See his article, "*Beirut 75: An Autobiographical Interpretation*."

<sup>xvi</sup> Samman describes it as a sexual revolution ( الثورة الجنسيه ) and sometimes as a sexual rebellion ( الانتفاضة الجنسيه ). It is important to note that Samman has personally called for a sexual revolution, where she has proposed several conditions that will lead to the success of it. Check Nabulsi's interview with her published in his book, *A Study of Ghada Samman's Literary Works*, page 79-80. Among women writers who wrote on sex and sexuality during the same time period Samman articulated her ideas on the sexual revolution are: Layal Ba'albaki, Hanan AlShaykh and Collette Khuri. However, the only one who explicitly called for a sexual revolution was Samman.

<sup>xvii</sup> My translation.

<sup>xviii</sup> In an interview Joseph Massad conducted with Ahdaf Soueif, Soueif discusses the autobiographical influence in her novels. Read more in Soueif's interview given to Massad: "The Politics of Desire in the Writings of Ahdaf Soueif."



<sup>xix</sup> “Middle Ground” is the literal meaning of Mezzeterra in Italian.

<sup>xx</sup> Asaad Al-Saleh wrote a dissertation chapter analyzing Barghouti’s memoir as displaced autobiographical writing. Check: *Displaced Autobiography*.

<sup>xxi</sup> The word “hegra” (which could also be spelt higr/hijra) used by Said is the Arabic word that means migration. Tayeb Saleh used the same term when writing his Arabic novel, *Mawsim Al-Hijra Ela al-Shamal*.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Michel Butor’s article, “Travel and Writing,” published in a book on travel theory by Susan Roberson called, *Defining Travel: Diverse Visions*. USA: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. 69-86.

<sup>xxiii</sup> For a detailed analysis of the works of the “Beirut Decentrists,” see miriam cooke’s *Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*.

<sup>xxiv</sup> In his book section, “Deviant in Power,” Joseph Massad also draws on different depictions an representations of male homosexuality in modern and contemporary Arabic literature as part of the body of postcolonial queer theory. See Massad’s book, *Desiring Arabs*.

<sup>xxv</sup> The translated quotes taken from *The Body is a Traveling Suitcase* are my own.

<sup>xxvi</sup> I have found other sources that relate the three-month prison sentence issued by the Syrian government in 1966 against Samman in absentia without further explaining details about the particular law. However, in the book chapter, “The Emancipating of Women in Syrian Literature,” Salih Altoma relates the reason Samman was sentenced to prison to a law that restricted women’s right to travel abroad alone without a male guardian.

<sup>xxvii</sup> According to Chambers, after the diasporic experience takes place, it is impossible to “go home again” (Chambers qtd. in Seshadri-Crooks 50). Check Seshadri-Crooks’ article “At the Margins of Postcolonial Studies.” Also check Chambers’ book, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Leila Aboulela uses the binary construction of the North/South instead of the East/West in the same manner Tayeb Salih uses it in *Season of Migration to the North*.

<sup>xxix</sup> For a full analysis of Leila Aboulela’s intertextuality of Tayeb Salih’s novel *Season of Migration to the North* in her novel *The Translator*, check Stephan Guth’s “Appropriating or Secretly Undermining the Secular Literary Heritage? Distant Echoes of *Mawsim al-Hijra* in a Muslim Writer’s Novel: Leila Aboulela, *The Translator*.”

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