

“Transfer” VIII: 1-2 (mayo 2013), pp. 70-90. ISSN: 1886-5542

LIVING IN A TRANSNATIONAL WORLD. TRANSLATION AS PART OF TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY

Dora Sales, Universitat Jaume I

Unlike my parents, I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to create and illuminate a nonexistent one. Fiction is the foreign land of my choosing, the place where I strive to convey and preserve the meaningful. And whether I write as an American or an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains constant: I translate, therefore I am.¹

On the Road of Translatability

As the Indian writer Jhumpa Lahiri puts forward in the above quotation, for a bilingual and transcultural writer such as herself, translation is a fertile starting point for fiction. Belonging to a contemporary cross-cultural society means that translation, understood as negotiation and mediation between the asymmetrical relations among languages and cultures, is a daily communicative need. The centrality of translation in plurilingual places where diverse cultures meet is a fact, and fiction writers who create both in (former) colonial tongues and in native languages are challenging and redefining many translation concepts.

Literary production in recent decades has opened itself to the cross-cultural encounters that define the present context. In this paper, the anthropological concept of *transculturation* (Ortiz 1940) as applied to literary creation (Rama 1982) will be used (Sales 2001).² In 1940, on the anthropological sphere, the Cuban

¹ JHUMPA Lahiri (2002). “Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation,” in: *Translation, Text, and Theory: The Paradigm of India*, ed. Rukmini Bhaya Nair. New Delhi: Sage, 120.

² The concept originally comes from the anthropological studies developed in Cuba by Fernando Ortiz, being later applied to literary studies by Ángel Rama. ORTIZ, Fernando

thinker Fernando Ortiz proposed the concept of *transculturation* in order to try to account for the complexity of cultural contact and emphasize not only the outcome of the junction between cultures, but the process by means of which it may somehow modify one or both of the cultures in touch and lead to new creations that come up from that encounter. Re-reading Ortiz, in order to develop the notion of narrative transculturation in the large space of Latin American fiction, the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama recovered and rethought the concept of transculturation in order to use it as core concept to explain the creative force implied in narratives coming from the transitivity between cultures, even when these hold dissimilar power positions: he believes that the form that springs out of an encounter between cultures, the transcultured one, is not only a sum of different elements, nor an imposition that deletes all the own features that define a dominated culture. Because there is originality in that form, certain independence, freedom, a new phenomenon, Rama assumes that the transcultural process is related to a selective and inventive ability, a capacity to work with both cultural worlds at the same time. In this sense,³ there will be losses, selections, rediscoveries and new forms.³

Transculturation is concerned with a necessary and helpful conception of culture as a living, malleable and active entity, and not of culture as either a static model or monolithic fetish. Moreover, the transcultural identity is not predicated upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions, but rather on their continual and mutual development: some features

(1973). *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*. Barcelona: Ariel. Ángel Rama (1982). *Transculturation narrativa en América Latina*. Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno. SALES, Dora (2001). “Transculturation narrativa: Posibilidades de un concepto latinoamericano para la teoría y la literatura comparada intercultural,” *Exemplaria. Revista de Literatura Comparada-Journal of Comparative Literature* 5 (2001): 21-37.

³ The concept was introduced into the English-speaking criticism, mainly post-colonial criticism, by means of Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s *The Cuban Condition*, and more widely, by Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes*. PÉREZ FIRMAT, Gustavo (1989). *The Cuban Condition. Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. PRATT, Mary Louise (1992). *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London/New York: Routledge).

are lost, and some others are gained, producing new forms even as older ones continue to exist.

Thus, transculturation is a hybrid, cross-cultural process that is constantly reshaping and replenishing itself. In this sense, I would associate it with Homi Bhabha’s concept of “in-betweenness” –the powerful reassessment of the creative potentialities of the liminal spaces–. In his reflections on culture and cultural criticism, Bhabha posits the relevance of hybrid cultural spaces, as well as the emergence of the interstices. He views culture as a site in permanent transition, where the inscription and articulation of in-between, interstitial passages in the middle of fixed identifications open up both the possibility of a cultural hybridity able to deal with difference and multiplicity, and the representation, without any assumed or imposed hierarchy, of this cultural hybridity. The main idea in Bhabha’s contention, which is also the core of the concept of transculturation, could be summed up in his following statement: “we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ –the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space– that carries the burden of the meaning of culture (...). And by exploring this third space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves”.⁴

Thus, transculturation enhances the reciprocal effect of the process of interaction, showing that it is a two-way path that, moreover, can result in new creations. Hybridization could be one of the characteristics deriving from that process, but it is not the chief feature of the process itself. Transculturation is certainly related to mixing, but it is mainly a communicative dynamic that helps going beyond the polarized dialectics between the dominant culture and the dominated one, the global and the local, acting as a bridge between them.

As a result of the encounter of different cultures, there are artistic productions that arise and decenter any totalizing gaze. In contrast with homogeneous positions, transcultural writing puts forward the will to articulate the interaction and dialogue between the one and the other, as a clear reflection of a society where

⁴ BHABHA, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London/New York: Routledge: 38-39.

diverse cultures co-exist. Sometimes using the (former) colonizer’s language and narrative systems, transcultural writers subvert established parameters, in order to regenerate, rework, and negotiate them from the perspective of their own culture and also from a transcultural viewpoint. They work simultaneously with diverse cultural sources, creating from the bridge, from the border, from the interstice.

Located in the cultural and linguistic gaps that emerge from the interaction of various cultures and languages, the narrative work of transcultural authors, mostly in the postcolonial sphere, is an emerging area where these meetings have taken their own voice. Their efforts to revise and rewrite identities that have previously been hidden, censored, or stereotyped by discourses promoted from the center can be seen as a type of translation.

Being conscious of the minorized position that these transcultural writers have in the global, essentially Western, context, many of these authors choose to write in the European language that reached their countries as part of the paradigm of imperialism, and which became the official language, a *lingua franca*, a communicative vehicle, a translanguing option through which they can get into the global, transnational repertoire, taking into account that a trans-lingual is “a writer who resides between languages”.⁵

The body of transcultural literature, written in any European language, is immense. Many examples, which represent different forms of transculturation and of relating to the Western language of their choice when writing their literary texts, could be mentioned: Maghrebi writers who write in French (e.g. Tahar Ben Jelloun, Assia Djebar), Turkish authors who write in German (e.g. Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Jakob Arjouni), Iranians writing in Dutch (e.g. Kader Abdolah), Guinean and Moroccan writers in Spanish (e.g. Donato Ndongo, Mohamed El Gheryb), Tunisian and Senegalese authors in Italian (e.g. Salah Methnani, Pap Kouma), and many other instances. The work of Puerto Rican writers, such as Rosario Ferré and Esmeralda Santiago, are also interesting. Bilingual speakers of Spanish and English, both of these authors

⁵ KELLMAN, Steven G. (2000). *The Translingual Imagination*. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, p. 9.

self-translate their novels from Spanish to English (Ferré) or vice versa (Santiago). The Dominican-American Julia Álvarez and the Cuban Cristina García are representative of different cases. Though their mother tongue is Spanish, English (their writing language) is the tongue they have learned and mastered, the tongue in which they have (re)created themselves. Also, the discourse produced by Chicano writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Carmen Tafolla, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Ana Castillo, or Gloria Anzaldúa, who negotiate their bilingualism and biculturalism from the cross-cultural sphere they live in, takes form in a fluctuating use of Spanish and English, developing a narrative code-switching that fosters a sort of translingual and transcultural reading of their texts. Another highly interesting practice is that of the Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña, who, as a living mixture of diverse ethnicities, created a hybrid and translingual poetry using three languages: Quechua, Spanish, and English. The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is also noteworthy. He wrote his first novels in English, which received critical acknowledgement, but, after being imprisoned in 1977 for political reasons, he decided to write in his African tongue, Gikuyú, and be translated (mostly self-translated) from it. Since then, and always defending coexistence in diversity, Ngũgĩ (1993)⁶ has argued for the need of translation as a vehicle for the dialogue between languages and cultures, and has directed for many years the Inter-national Center for Writing and Translation at the University of California, Irvine.

All in all, the transcultural literary work referred to above seems to share an underlying aim, namely, to decenter monolingualism and, thereby, to dismantle a monolithical worldview. In the twenty-first century, in our paradoxical era of globalities and particularities, this sort of fiction stands as an instance of the possibility of cross-cultural communication, the ability to overcome seemingly incommensurable differences, the need for translatability, the relevance of negotiation, dialogue, and pluralism, together with the preservation of particularities, echoing Ngũgĩ’s (1993) viewpoint:

⁶ WA THIONG’O, Ngũgĩ (1993). *Moving the Centre. The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey/Heinemann.

The transition in African, Asian, South American, North American and European letters is towards traditions that will freely give and take, on the basis of equality and mutual respect, from this vast heritage of human creativity. The wealth of a common global culture will then be expressed in the particularities of our different languages and cultures very much like a universal garden of many-coloured flowers. The “floweriness” of the different flowers is expressed in their very diversity. But there is cross-fertilisation between them. And what is more they all contain in themselves the seeds of a new tomorrow.⁷

Indeed, translation is so central to the experiences of diverse transcultural authors that, in some cases, translation practice is closely correlated with writing in their literary project. In other instances, it is also present in the plots of the novels, as in those shared in this essay, namely *The Translator* (1999)⁸ by the Sudanese author Leila Aboulela, *The Interpreter* (2003)⁹ by the Korean-North American author Suki Kim, and *The Mission Song* (2006)¹⁰ by the British author John Le Carré. Honestly, the purpose of this paper is not to analyze these fictions in depth, but to offer them as exceptional narrative proposals that put forward, from different perspectives and with diverse hues, the relevance of translation and interpreting as ways of life and allegories of transcultural identity.

The view of translation expressed in these novels echoes the trend in translation studies that has been developed mainly since the cultural turn in translation studies, starting in the 1980s.¹¹ Translation as an activity that reflects the world it renders, using language as a powerful tool. Translation, in fact, implies communication and negotiation, in the complex meeting point of cultures, ideology, and power. Indeed, as Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi contend:

⁷ WA THIONG’O, Ngugi (1993). *Moving the Centre. The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey/Heinemann, p. 24.

⁸ ABOULELA, Leila (1999). *The Translator*. Edinburgh: Polygon.

⁹ KIM, Suki (2003). *The Interpreter*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux.

¹⁰ LE CARRÉ, John (2006). *The Mission Song*. London: Little, Brown & Co.

¹¹ BASSNETT, Susan & LEFEVERE, André (eds.). (1990). *Translation, History, and Culture*. London: Pinter Publishers.

Translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity, but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems.¹²

The protagonists of the novels highlighted in this essay act as visible translators and interpreters, conscious of their mediation and constant negotiation between cultures. In recent decades, the idea of invisibility has been problematized in translation and interpreting studies, as Maria Tymoczko and Claudia Angelelli have put forward, among others.¹³ According to this approach, the translator’s involvement and visibility are, above all, part of the ethics of translation. As Antoine Berman argues, the possibilities of the translator’s subjectivity, conscious of the ethical responsibility of his or her mediation, are crucial in the translation process:¹⁴

The very aim of translation – to open up in writing a certain relation with the Other, to fertilize what is one’s Own through the mediation of what is Foreign– is diametrically opposed to the ethnocentric structure of every culture, that species of narcissism by which every society wants to be a pure and unadulterated Whole. [...] The essence of translation is to be an opening, a dialogue, a

¹² BASSNETT, Susan & TRIVEDI, Harish (1999). “Introduction: Of Colonies, Cannibals, and Vernaculars”, in: Susan Bassnett & Harish Trivedi (eds.). *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge, p. 2.

¹³ TYMOCZKO, Maria (2003). “Ideology and the Position of the Translator: In What Sense is a Translator ‘In-Between’?”, in: CALZADA, María (ed.). *Apropos of Ideology. Translation Studies on Ideology–Ideologies in Translation Studies*, Manchester: St. Jerome, pp. 181-201. ANGELELLI, Claudia V. (2004). *Revisiting the Interpreter’s Role. A Study of Conference, Court, and Medical Interpreters in Canada, Mexico, and the United States*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

¹⁴ BERMAN, Antoine (2000). “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign,” tr. Lawrence Venuti (“La traduction comme épreuve de l’étranger”, 1985, in: Venuti, Lawrence (ed.). *The Translation Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 284-97).

cross-breeding, a decentering. Translation is “a putting in touch with,” or it is nothing.¹⁵

Lawrence Venuti also defends the need to create strategies of resistance to avoid the translator’s invisibility:

A translated text should be the site where a different culture emerges, where a reader gets a glimpse of a cultural other, and resistancy, a translation strategy based on an aesthetic of discontinuity, can best preserve that difference, that otherness, by reminding the reader of the gains and losses in the translation process and the unbridgeable gaps between cultures.¹⁶

It is not possible to provide a single and fixed definition of translation, because translation is a task that is constantly being redefined, as the historical, political and socio-cultural context to which it relates alters. Translation is constantly present in our contemporary world of encounters and movements. Michael Cronin (2006: 10) puts forward this perspective, regarding “the possibility of thinking about translation as a way not only of thinking but of being and acting in the world.”¹⁷ Indeed, to translate means to intervene, to act, to understand that categorizations are not universal but socially constructed narratives. And this is so because language and culture imply ideology, values, beliefs and viewpoints. It is, precisely, because linguistic and cultural diversity exists that translation is always possible, especially as a bridging and creative transcultural form.

¹⁵ BERMAN, Antoine (1992). *The Experience of the Foreign*, tr. Stefan Heyvaert (*L'épreuve de l'étranger*, 1984, tr. New York: State University of New York Press), p. 4.

¹⁶ VENUTI, Lawrence (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation*. London: Routledge, p. 306.

¹⁷ CRONIN, Michael (2006). *Translation and Identity*. London: Routledge, p. 10.

Transcultural Identities and Translating Consciousness

Exchange is oxygen.¹⁸

The relevance of translation in postcolonial and transcultural contexts is enhanced in thought-provoking essays such as G.N. Devy's on Indian literary history, where he discusses the existence of a “translating consciousness,”¹⁹ present in multilingual localities where a dominating colonial language has acquired a privileged status, which is similar to the “translation sensibility” put forward by Gustavo Pérez Firmat in his essay on the importance of translation in the development of Cuban literature.²⁰ Pérez Firmat's concept is also related to the “translative awareness” named by Caroline Bergvall in order to describe some fictions by plurilingual, transcultural authors.²¹ This translating consciousness, sensibility, and awareness are indeed visible, although in various ways, in the novels put forward as instances in this essay. These concepts refer, in a simple descriptive manner, to the fact that transcultural subjects are very much conscious, sensible and aware of the relevance of translation as a communicative force in their lives and their in-between creations.

In this sense, the first novel I would like to mention is *The Translator* (1999), by Leila Aboulela.²² In my opinion, Aboulela's

¹⁸ CÉSAIRE, Aimé (1955). *Discourse on Colonialism*, tr. Joan Pinkham (*Discours sur le colonialisme*, 1950, tr. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1955), p. 11.

¹⁹ DEVY, G.N. (1998). *Of Many Heroes. An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography*. New Delhi: Sangam Books/Prestige, pp. 154-5.

²⁰ PÉREZ FIRMAT, Gustavo (1989). *The Cuban Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, p. 1.

²¹ BERGVALL, Caroline (2000). “Performing Writing at the Crossroads of Languages,” in: *Translating Nations*, ed. Prem Poddar, Aarhus: Aarhus UP, p. 252.

²² Born in Cairo, Egypt in 1964, Aboulela grew up in Sudan. She learned English at the Khartoum American School and at the Sisters' School, a private Catholic high school. Aboulela earned a degree in economics, specializing in statistics, at the University of Khartoum. She then travelled to Britain, where she earned a M.Sc. and a MPhil in Statistics from the London School of Economics. In 1990, she moved to Scotland with her husband and children. She started writing in 1992 while working as a lecturer at Aberdeen College and later as a research assistant at Aberdeen University. Since 2000, Leila Aboulela has lived in Jakarta, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha. Her works have been

fiction emerges from her acute sense of geographical and cultural displacement. Her transcultural viewpoint from an immigrant experience does not imply struggling in order to adapt or assimilate to the host society. On the contrary, her main characters, mostly female, search for their own identities, on a personal, cultural, and religious level, in a process of complete self-questioning and self-reconstruction fostered by the geographical distance from their homelands. Indeed, for Aboulela, who comes from a progressive family that did not deny women’s rights and freedom (her grandmother studied Medicine in Egypt in the 1940s, and her mother was a university lecturer), religion is not a matter of customs and beliefs attached to tradition, but above all a matter of personal faith (ABOULELA 2005).²³

Her debut novel, *The Translator*, was nominated for the Orange Prize in 2000 and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards in 2001. It was one of *The New York Times* 100 Notable Books of the Year. With *The Translator*, Aboulela offers a realistic and lucid novel about the search for identity and its constant revision and negotiation, which is always open and ductile. Her protagonist, Sammar, is a Sudanese woman brought up between Great Britain and Sudan, who works as an Arab translator at the University of Aberdeen. She is a young widow and her son is back in Sudan while she tries to reorganize her life and strength. The novel depicts a romance that arises between Sammar and Rae, a Scottish secular academic at the same university, for whom Sammar translates. He is an Orientalist specialized in postcolonial politics, twice divorced and professed skeptic regarding religion.

Sammar finds herself somehow divided between her Muslim religious beliefs and her wishes as a woman. In spite of all the

published in anthologies and journals in Great Britain. BBC Radio has adapted her work extensively and broadcast a number of her plays, including *The Mystic Life* and the historical drama *The Lion of Chechnya*. The five-part radio serialization of *The Translator* was short-listed for the RIMA (Race In the Media Award). In 2000 she was awarded the Caine Prize, known as the “African Booker,” for her story “The Museum”. *The Translator* (1999) was her first novel, followed by a book of short stories, *Coloured Lights* (2001), and the novels *Minaret* (2005) and *Lyrics Alley* (2010).

²³ ABOULELA, Leila (2005). “Keep the faith,” Interview by Anita Sethi. *The Observer* (5 June 2005): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jun/05/fiction.features2> (accessed 14 May 2012).

differences that separate them, mainly regarding the relevance they give to religion as part of one’s personal identity, she falls in love with Rae. As a woman she wants to find individual freedom, but, at the same time, she cannot turn her back on her culture and, above all, her Muslim faith, which she rediscovers and learns to appreciate in her daily life in Aberdeen, as a way to understand and cope with the world around her. Sammar and Rae negotiate their differences, exchanging viewpoints and developing a kind of relation similar to a translation process: an interstitial dialogue, with spaces for resistance and creation, where, above all, what matters is an understanding shared by both parts. That is, as they do want to communicate and create an in-between space for themselves, they symbolically translate their differences, in order to understand each other.

In more than one sense, Sammar’s profession may be seen as an allegory. She works as a translator at the university and, she is even sent to Egypt in order to work as an interpreter between fundamentalists (with whom she openly disagrees) and British mediators. This experience becomes a test of faith for Sammar, who throughout the novel also acts as a translator-mediator who, little by little, introduces Islam to the reader in a didactic manner. Through the depiction of Sammar’s her daily life in Aberdeen, the reader learns about her understanding of the meaning of fastings, prayers, and the *hijab*. She presents them as part of her religious culture, not as an oppression, but as a personal choice within particular cultural boundaries.²⁴ Moreover, the relationship between Sammar and Rae provides a model for cross-cultural exchange, conversation, love, and translation that resists the stagnant binaries of East and West, the remaining ideologies of colonialism. In this transcultural narrative, in contrast to any sort of exotization on Islam, Aboulela offers an intimate and personal viewpoint on her religion, translating it in the daily life of a Muslim woman in a contemporary Western context.

In Suki Kim’s *The Interpreter* (2003) we may find another example where translation is used as an allegory of the

²⁴ See also ABOULELA, Leila (2007). “Restraint? Sure. Oppression? Hardly”, *The Washington Post* (22 July 2007): <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/20/AR2007072002147.html> (accessed 14 May 2012).

transcultural identity.²⁵ The novel was critically acclaimed and won the PEN Beyond Margins Award and the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award. In it, Kim puts forward a clever reflection on cultural identities in constant movement, always searching for parameters within which to define themselves. Suzy Park, the main character, is a young Korean-American who works as an interpreter in New York City court. *The Interpreter* is formally a noir novel, in which Suzy Park behaves increasingly as a visible interpreter, that is, an interpreter that assumes and puts forward her active role in communication, resisting translation’s invisibility, to echo Venuti.

Kim’s fiction develops a narrative on the complex tensions that underlie interpreting between languages and cultures. The author herself admits the personal involvement that the writing of this novel meant for her, and also the personal research she carried out for this purpose:

I did a lot of research for Suzy’s character. I learned interpreting in order to understand Suzy’s motives. I went to Montauk to see what Suzy would see. I walked around the city, often with no clear destination, just as Suzy might. In a way, I lived the life of Suzy Park during the writing of *The Interpreter*. In this way, the novel took on a tone of mystery. Surely its subject, which includes murder among other things, renders itself to such a genre, but more likely, the suspenseful overtone was inevitable because I became an obsessed detective, always closely examining her.²⁶

Suzy’s parents were murdered in their grocer’s shop, in what seemed just one more case of armed robbery with dramatic consequences. When Suzy Park, during a trial where she is

²⁵ Suki Kim was born in Seoul, South Korea in 1970, and migrated to New York with her family when she was thirteen. She graduated in English, minor in East Asian Literature, from Barnard College in 1992. Then, she moved to London to study Korean literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). She received a Fulbright Research Grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Being bilingual, Kim started the translation of a novel as part of her postgraduate work, but in that process she discovered she enjoyed writing her own fiction.

²⁶ KIM, Suki (2006). <http://www.sukikim.com/> Suki Kim’s Official Website (accessed 28 March 2006). Currently not available.

interpreting, comes across a clue to the murder of her parents five years ago, the urgency to know and understand what happened then leads to research on her family, the Korean-American experience, and her own identity. However, in the course of her investigation, Suzy discovers the dark ins and outs of immigration, mafias, and police corruption. All in all, she discovers the high price that many ordinary people (as her parents) feel obliged to pay in order to pursue their dream of a better future for them and their children. The novel concludes establishing a parallelism between Suzy’s task and her own translingual and transcultural existence across cultures. Indeed, in a clarifying statement, Suki Kim explains her interest on interpreting as the core of her novel:

I certainly focused on the theme of interpreting from the beginning. Interpreting suggests duality. It is a position of translating two languages while traversing two worlds.²⁷

Kim read extensively on interpreting, but she realized that was not enough:

So I called up interpreting agencies and passed their exams and interviews and worked as an interpreter at depositions. With each interpreting assignment, more ideas kept coming to me about the character and the plot. Suzy Park examines her life through interpreting but I was closely examining Suzy [...] I kept thinking about a character who was always crossing boundaries, and, at some point, I realized that she could only be an interpreter.²⁸

In the story, interpreting is not only a resource for the plot; it also serves as an allegory of the protagonist’s translingual and transcultural experience. In other words, it is also a powerful way to conceptualize, represent, and understand Suzy Park’s cross-cultural life, somebody “always crossing boundaries”, in Kim’s above words.

²⁷ YOON, Cindy (2011) “Interview with Suki Kim, Author of *The Interpreter*,” *Asia Society*. <http://asiasociety.org/arts/literature/suki-kim-and-interpreter> (accessed 29 November 2011).

²⁸ YOON, Cindy, “Interview with Suki Kim, Author of *The Interpreter*”.

Suzy feels in a kind of identity limbo, a gap between languages and cultures. For her, interpreting is a natural way of communication, because she is constantly thinking in both languages, and she feels neither completely North American nor completely Korean. As a legal interpreter at court, she finds herself behaving as a mediator, taking an active role in order to clarify meanings and hues.

At this point it may be interesting to explain that research on public services interpreting (health, legal, and social service contexts) examines face-to-face interaction between speakers from a sociolinguistic or discourse analysis perspective, and it helps to reconsider the traditionally assumed invisibility and lack of participation of the interpreter, who, indeed, is a key and active participant in the conversational exchange. Cecilia Wadensjö, a leading scholar in this field, studies a wide corpus of conversations from health, legal, and social services contexts, concluding that the interpreter’s role involves two interrelated activities: linguistic and cultural mediation, and conversational coordination.²⁹ For Wadensjö, the question is not *if* the interpreter influences the conversational development, but *how* he or she exerts that influence.

This is, precisely, what Suzy learns. Living in-between North-American society and the Korean community, Suzy examines and shows how communication occurs, how it occasionally fails. She delves into the distances and gaps between languages and cultures, and, above all, she finally offers the possibility to bridge them somehow.

These reflections on interpreting and visibility also relate to John Le Carré’s *The Mission Song* (2006), a novel that condemns Western hypocrisy regarding Africa through the instance of the Congo, and the destructive exploitation of African resources.³⁰ *The Mission Song* has a transcultural interpreter as the main character and first-person narrator: Bruno Salvador, known as Salvo, orphaned love-child of a Catholic Irish missionary and a

²⁹ WADENSJÖ, Cecilia (1998). *Interpreting as Interaction*. London: Routledge.

³⁰ John le Carré is the *nom de plume* of David John Moore Cornwell (b. 1931), prolific British author who in his youth worked for the British Intelligence, and who is very well known for his acute espionage novels.

Congolese headman's daughter. Brought up by Catholic missionaries in the Congo, and later in a discreet Vatican shelter for illegitimate secret children, Salvo prepares himself almost naturally, due to his multilingual upbringing, to work as a professional interpreter in the minority African languages of which, almost from birth, he has been a passionate learner.

He graduates from the University of London in African languages and cultures, and becomes a highly requested professional, courted by city corporations, hospitals, law courts, the immigration services and, inevitably, due to his particular linguistic specialization, the powerful overworld of British Intelligence. He is also courted by the white, Surrey-born Penelope, reporter for one of the main English national newspapers, whom he marries on impulse.

Nonetheless, at a hospital where he goes to interpret for a dying African man, he meets Hannah, a Congolese nurse, and they fall in love. From my critical viewpoint, for Salvo, Hannah represents the roots and African culture he has denied himself in his marriage. Hannah encourages him to use his interpreting ability in favor of the African people.

Then, as events unfold on one of his top-level assignments, he realizes that he is interpreting for Western financiers and East Congolese warlords who are planning a major intervention in the Congo, one that will claim many lives. Despite its human cost, this intervention, supported by international troops, is presented as guaranteeing peace and, above all, foreign investment. However, the real objective of the operation is to steal the mineral wealth of the country, and increase the plundering. Salvo also becomes aware of the brutal methods used by part of the troops, when he listens to an interrogation and witnesses tortures. Back in London, Salvo and Hannah fight in order to tell the story to the authorities and the press, but they are prevented to do so and the evidence proving their accusations, namely the tapes and notebooks from Salvo's interpreting, disappear. All in all, along the novel, Salvo learns to rediscover himself and becomes aware of the fact that it is not possible to remain neutral, and that crossbreeding and transculturation is not a vacuum, but a creative and dynamic experience.

Following an inner process similar to the one experienced by Suzy Park in Kim’s *The Interpreter*, a key point in Le Carré’s novel is how, at the beginning, Salvo has an impersonal view of his task as an interpreter, and how, step by step, as the story unfolds, as his relationship with Hannah helps him to cope with his transcultural identity, in-between languages and cultures, he also feels himself like a living bridge, an intercultural mediator that cannot be aseptic, and learns to be ethical to himself. In fact, a leading translation scholar such as Mona Baker uses the example of this character, Salvo, in order to develop her viewpoint on the ethics of translation:

His dilemma unfolds gradually as he begins to realise what he is involved in. Halfway through the book, as he continues to work ‘professionally’ with his clients, he says “I feel dirty and don’t know why” (LE CARRÉ, 2006: 180). Before long, he finds himself smuggling evidence of their illicit activities in order to expose their plans and abort the ‘operation’. Is his behaviour ethical? In my view, there is no question: it is, and its opposite –not acting against the client– would have been unethical. Does it unsettle clients and foster an atmosphere of mistrust to realise that interpreters and translators can and do take or switch sides under certain circumstances? Of course it does, but that doesn’t mean we can do much to mitigate this anxiety. We are dealing with human beings, not machines, and no code of conduct or talk about ‘professionalism’ can ever change this reality.³¹

Indeed, Sammar, Suzy and Salvo share this essence: they are transcultural and translingual subjects who work as professional interpreters and translators, but who learn to know, above all, that the in-between space is a constant negotiation and decision-taking in a particular context and moment in time. Translation is a discursive operation which is ideological and political in nature. The activity of the translator is never confined to translation alone: translators are social agents who communicate differences and negotiate limits. The translator is never neutral and cannot be

³¹ BAKER, Mona (2008). “Ethics of Renarration. Mona Baker is Interviewed by Andrew Chesterman,” *Cultus* 1.1 (2008): 10-33. <http://www.monabaker.com/documents/CULTUSInterviewFinal.pdf> (accessed 20 December 2011).

exempted from the need to take a position. Indeed, any translator is constantly obliged to do just that.

By way of conclusion: Translation as Part of the Creation and Understanding of Transcultural Identities

The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.³²

The novels by Aboulela, Kim and Le Carré put forward in this essay share a reflection on transcultural identity in which translation plays an essential role. Nowadays, there is no doubt about the relevance of translation as a vehicle for the construction of cultural representations. Nonetheless, in a quite exceptional manner, in these fictions translation and interpreting are ways of living, or, rather, ways of surviving and of interpersonal communication for transcultural characters who search their place in the world.

Transcultural narratives and characters such as those depicted in the works by Aboulela, Kim and Le Carré are testimony to the key role of translation in transcultural situations, in a third space created when cultures meet. In different ways, the characters of Sammar, Suzy and Salvo exemplify and embody the complexity of cultural encounters, communicating differences and making visible their mediation processes. They indeed create spaces for resistance, doubt, dialogue, and constant interaction. They preserve features from the cultures they live in-between, negotiating their differences from their transcultural worldview or experience.

³² RUSHDIE, Salman (1991). “Imaginary Homelands,” in: *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. New York: Granta Books, p. 17.

Taking into account that, as Venuti explains, “any attempt to make translation visible today is necessarily a political gesture,”³³ these fictions, showing that transcultural identities live in a translational world (a world where translation is their own way of communication and living), also enhance the essential relevance of translation in the present globalized context, where communication processes need to be, increasingly, translational.³⁴

All in all, transculturation, the in-between third space emerges as a productive way for the borderline experience of contact between cultures, both in life and in fiction, where the negotiation of differences, sometimes incommensurable, may create a complex tension that could also grow into a strategy of cultural survival: beyond polarizations, against the grain of the rhetoric of binarism, from a creative in-between transcultural space of communicative bridging.

Works Cited

- ABOULELA, Leila. (1999). *The Translator*. Edimburgh: Polygon.
- . (2001). *Coloured Lights*. Edimburgh: Polygon.
- . (2005). *Minaret*. London: Bloomsbury.
- . (2010). *Lyrics Alley*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- . (2005). “Keep the faith,” Interview by Anita Sethi. *The Observer* (5 June 2005): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jun/05/fiction.features2> (accessed 14 May 2012).
- . (2007). “Restraint? Sure. Oppression? Hardly,” *The Washington Post* (22 July 2007): <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/20/AR2007072002147.html> (accessed 14 May 2012).
- ANGELELLI, Claudia V. (2004). *Revisiting the Interpreter’s Role: A Study of Conference, Court, and Medical Interpreters in*

³³ VENUTI, Lawrence (ed.). *Rethinking Translation. Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*. London/New York: Routledge, p. 10.

³⁴ VIDAL CLARAMONTE, M. Carmen África (2009). “Rethinking Translation in the 21st Century,” *MonTI. Monografías de Traducción e Interpretación* 1 (2009), pp. 39-48.

- Canada, Mexico, and the United States*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- BAKER, Mona. (2008). “Ethics of Renarration. Mona Baker is Interviewed by Andrew Chesterman,” *Cultus* 1.1 (2008): 10-33.
<http://www.monabaker.com/documents/CULTUSInterviewFinal.pdf> (accessed 20 December 2011).
- BASSNETT, Susan & TRIVEDI, Harish (1999). “Introduction: Of Colonies, Cannibals, and Vernaculars,” in: BASSNETT, Susan & TRIVEDI, Harish (eds.). *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-18.
- BASSNETT, Susan & LEFEVERE, André (ed.). (1990). *Translation, History and Culture*. London: Pinter Publishers.
- BERGVALL, Caroline, (2000). “Performing Writing at the Crossroads of Languages,” in: *Translating Nations*, ed. Prem Poddar. Aarhus: Aarhus UP, pp. 248-267.
- BERMAN, Antoine. (1992). *The Experience of the Foreign*, tr. Stefan Heyvaert (1984; New York: State University of New York P, 1992).
- . (2000). “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign,” tr. Lawrence Venuti in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (1985; London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 284-297.
- CÉSAIRE, Aimé. (1955). *Discourse on Colonialism*, tr. Joan Pinkham (1950; New York: Monthly Review Press, 1955).
- CRONIN, Michael. (2006). *Translation and Identity*. London: Routledge.
- DEVY, G.N. (1998). *‘Of Many Heroes’: An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography*. New Delhi: Sangam Books/Prestige.
- KELLMAN, Steven G. (2000). *The Translingual Imagination*. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press.
- KIM, Suki. (2003). *The Interpreter*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux.
- LE CARRÉ, John. (2006). *The Mission Song*. London: Little, Brown & Co.
- LAHIRI, Jhumpa. (2002). “Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation,” in: RUKMINI Bhaya Nair (ed.). *Translation, Text and Theory. The Paradigm of India*. New Delhi: Sage, pp. 113-20.

- WA THIONG’O, Ngugi(1993). *Moving the Centre. The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey/Heinemann.
- ORTIZ, Fernando (1940/1073). *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*. Bronislaw Malinowski (prologue). Barcelona: Ariel.
- PÉREZ FIRMAT, Gustavo (1989). *The Cuban Condition. Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- PRATT, Mary Louise (1992). *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London/New York: Routledge.
- RAMA, Ángel (1982). *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*. México: Siglo Veintiuno.
- RUSHDIE, Salman. (1991). “Imaginary Homelands,” in: *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. New York: Granta Books, pp. 9-21.
- SALES, Dora (2001). “Transculturación narrativa: Posibilidades de un concepto latinoamericano para la teoría y la literatura comparada intercultural,” *Exemplaria. Revista de Literatura Comparada-Journal of Comparative Literature* 5 (2001): 21-37.
- TYMOCZKO, Maria. (2003). “Ideology and the Position of the Translator: In What Sense is a Translator ‘In-Between’?,” in: CALZADA, María (ed.). *Apropos of Ideology: Translation Studies on Ideology-Ideologies in Translation Studies*. Manchester: St. Jerome, pp.181-201.
- VENUTI, Lawrence (ed.) (1992). *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*. London: Routledge.
- . (1995). *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.
- VIDAL CLARAMONTE, M. Carmen África (2009). “Rethinking Translation in the 21st Century,” *MonTI. Monografías de Traducción e Interpretación* 1 (2009): 39-48.
- WADENSJÖ, Cecilia (1998). *Interpreting as Interaction*. London: Routledge.
- www.sukikim.com/ Suki Kim’s Official Website (accessed 28 March 2006). Currently not available.
- YOON, Cindy. (2011). “Interview with Suki Kim, Author of *The Interpreter*,” *Asia Society*.

“**Transfer**” VIII: 1-2 (mayo 2013), pp. 70-90. ISSN: 1886-5542

<http://asiasociety.org/arts/literature/suki-kim-and-interpreter>
(accessed 29 November 2011).