Essay

Interculturality in African Fiction: Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

Abstract

This essay examines the term 'interculturality', meaning the relationship between cultures, from the perspective of literary studies. Leila Aboulela's novel The Translator – which is not just a typical love story but also deals with important facets of biographies in modern globalized settings – is used as an example to show how identities become influenced by the clash of different cultures. The concepts of being a stranger and of being at home start to blend and are no longer clearly defined and separated from one another. On the example of the female protagonist Sammar, a Muslim woman from Khartoum who moves to Scotland, the novel deals with the aspects of intercultural encounters and raises questions about the 'translatability' of cultures and religions. It approaches these concerns through a postcolonial lens, drawing into view the impact of Westernization and modernization on Africa. The novel also reaches for a deeper understanding of the experiences of being a stranger, of belonging and of being at home.

Between Cultures – Interculturality and Interstitial Identities

In the increasingly globalized world, in which boundaries become more and more porous, it is necessary to reassess concepts that seemed to be absolute and unquestionable. The idea of culture as a homogeneous and restricted entity, as a body delimited from the outside, for example, does not seem appropriate any longer. Categories of home and belonging, which are part of identifying with a culture, society or place, become increasingly blurred. It is the most basic distinction between the self and the other that, in the process of globalization

and the obscuring of borders, seems to become more imprecise and indistinct. Therefore, experiences of 'trans-', 'cross-' or 'interculturality' [1] are global phenomena that do not only influence theoretical and scientific approaches but almost every interpersonal encounter in general. The term 'interculturality' has become more important in everyday vocabulary and is commonly understood as the interaction between different cultures. This essay, when discussing the term 'intercultural', refers to this general understanding as described by the authors Fred E. Jandt and Donald W. Klopf. According to these two scholars, intercultural encounters are defined as interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Jandt 13; Klopf 63f). This approach implies an understanding of the concept of culture as a unity, in which a group of people shares the same patterns of behaviour, values and beliefs.

This cultural pattern is "the blueprint that determines the way we think, feel, and behave" (Klopf 35). Consequently, culture is not only a part, but also – and even more significantly – a major determinant of every individual's identity and orientation system (Jandt 6ff; Klopf 34f).

While this understanding of 'interculturality' is useful to outline major themes in Aboulela's novel, it is, however, crucial to also explore the inclinations and problems that arise with this term. Consequently, this analysis intends to go beyond the above definition and to critically question the concept of 'culture' that is brought forward by referring to 'intercultural' relations.

German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch discusses this aspect comprehensively in his essay *Transculturality - the Puzzling Form of*

[1] The terms 'crosscultural', 'transcultural' and 'intercultural' are often used as synonyms. From an academic perspective, however, this practice is questionable. Wolfgang Welsch, for example, who will be referred to in this article, draws a strict distinction between the concepts of 'inter-' and 'transculturality' as well as 'globalization' and 'multiculturality'. A detailed definition and distinction of these terms would go beyond the possibilities and purposes of this essay. Therefore, it will concentrate on the concept of 'interculturality' and distinguish it further by giving an insight in Welsch's theory of 'transculturality'.

Cultures Today (1999). As already mentioned above, our understanding of 'culture' as a closed and homogenous entity does not seem appropriate any longer in an ever-changing and global world. These aspects will be explored in more detail by drawing upon *The Translator* as a literary example.

In general, the experience of coming across foreign traditions and beliefs is part of most modern-life narratives and can also be traced in literature. In many writings, the experience of *the Other* and the search for *home* and *belonging* are growing motifs. Intercultural encounters have not only emerged with the beginning of the modern age but can be seen as universal phenomena. They are implicit in human existence and society in general, as interactions between different ethnicities, social groups, religions or families have taken place since the earliest times of human history but the process of globalization, which is characterised by growing technologies and communication systems, a decrease in economic boundaries and rising migration possibilities and rates, is the reason for an intensification of intercultural contacts as well as cultural and ethnic transformations (Jandt 2007: 9-13; Klopf 1998: 3-17).

African literature in particular seems to incorporate this aspect as a major focus. This essay seeks to show through the example of the Sudanese female writer, Leila Aboulela, the importance of the discourse of interculturality in an African context. Her novel, *The Translator,* does not simply unfold as a love story between two characters from different cultural backgrounds; it deals in a profound way with the problems of intercultural encounters and raises questions about the 'translatability' of cultures and religions. It approaches these concerns through a postcolonial lens, drawing into view the impact of Westernization and modernization on African biographies. The novel also explores the experiences of being a stranger, of belonging and of being at home (Araujo 2014: 166ff; Cooper 2008: 43; Steiner 2008: 7-11).

Aboulela's fiction, thus, raises many questions that are also highly topical in a number of academic disciplines, among them sociology and translation studies. An analysis of the novel, which links the fictional representation of intercultural encounters with different theoretical approaches, allows one to gain a more complex understanding of Aboulela's work.

It is interesting to consider details of the author's biography when analysing the representation of interculturality in her fiction. Although Aboulela was born in 1964 in Cairo, Egypt, the homeland of her mother, she grew up in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, which was her father's country. Thus, it is clear that for Aboulela, home itself was intercultural. She had further experience with interculturality when she attended an American primary school. Later, she went to the Catholic Sisters' School in Khartoum, even though she was raised in a Muslim family. This means that she encountered at school a different system of symbols, beliefs and behaviours than at home. She was exposed to a different culture with its specific patterns. After finishing her degree in Economics at the University of Khartoum, she went to Great Britain for further education at the London School of Economics. There she studied for her Master's degree in Statistics. She married and moved with her husband to Scotland, where she lectured and published her first books (Cooper 2008: 43f). This shows Aboulela's personal experience of interculturality. Moreover, the mere fact that Aboulela is a Sudanese writer with a Western education is a classic example of an intercultural identity.

In *The Translator*, Aboulela constructs a central female character, Sammar, who seems to have a lot in common with the author herself. Sammar shares with the author the experience of interculturality. The main character of the novel was born in Scotland but raised in Khartoum. There she met her cousin, childhood friend, and later husband, Tarig. He took Sammar back to Aberdeen where he studied medicine. Being confronted with

the foreign culture of Scotland, Sammar clearly experiences the phenomenon of interculturality. In *The Translator* it is quite clear that Sudanese culture and even more importantly the religion of Islam are determining aspects in defining the identity of the protagonist (Steiner 2008: 8). In fact, it is quite hard to separate cultural and religious determinants since they are intertwined. Sammar's bond to the Sudanese culture becomes visible, in particular, when she talks about her life and recalls her childhood memories.

The heroine thinks about an old habit of hers "to reinvent the beginnings of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan" (Aboulela 2001: 5). This indicates that she experiences Sudan as her place of heritage and that it forms her cultural 'blueprint'. It is the same with Sammar's relation to Islam. Her religion determines her behaviour and thought patterns. This consideration can be found throughout the novel, for example, when she reminds herself: "'My fate is etched out by Allah Almighty, if and who I will marry, what I eat, the work I find, my health, the day I will die are as He alone wants them to be.'" (74) The strong impact of religion on the heroine is portrayed in this passage. These two extracts of the novel indicate that the two key determinants of the main character's personality are her native Sudanese culture and her bond to the religion of Islam.

Apart from the Sudanese culture, other cultures have an impact on Sammar's behaviour, thoughts and emotions. Because of her life in Aberdeen, she is influenced by Western culture. The cultural differences that she experiences in England are a shock at first. After some time, however, she experiences these things as normalities and becomes used to the new Scottish environment, customs and people. "Sammar walked to work through familiar streets. […] Even certain people's faces had become familiar over time." (71). Additional factors that indicate the ways in which she is partly shaped by Western culture are that she is fluent in English,

that she has a "British passport" because she "was born in Britain" (73), and that she works at the University of Aberdeen as a translator for Rae Isles, a Middle East historian and lecturer in Postcolonial Politics. Because of her job, she is incorporated into Scottish society and is familiar with the required work ethic. Furthermore, the ability to speak English enables her to be part of European as well as global culture.

Regarding Aboulela's construct of a female protagonist that is shaped by two very different societies, this essay arrives at the point of reviewing the term 'interculturality'. It is apparent that German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch's understanding of culture is of importance in this context. Welsch argues that the "classical model of culture is not only descriptively unserviceable, but also normatively dangerous and untenable. What is called for today is a departure from this concept and to think of cultures beyond the contraposition of ownness and foreignness" (1999: 2). With this ideology he contradicts the statement by Jandt and Klopf who define 'culture' as a unity. Welsch suggests 'transculturality' as a term to explain the contemporary situation.

For him individuals shaped by cultures are not delimited and unambiguous units but hybrid, interconnected beings and, thus, lacking a clear boundary between the self and the other (4ff). This aspect becomes visible not only in the figure of Sammar but also in the representation of cultures in the novel. The heroine, as shown above, falls under the influence of Sudanese and British culture, which is symbolized by her ability to speak Arabic and English. Her biography – she is a child of Sudanese parents, was born in Britain but raised in Sudan, is living in Aberdeen and returns to Khartoum – also underlines her transcultural personality (Cooper 2008: 44). Furthermore, Aboulela's illustration of culture in general shows a similar understanding as given by Welsch. There seem to be no clear boundaries between the cultures, which can be explored in various situations throughout the novel.

The Scottish or Western culture as depicted by Aboulela, for example, does not appear as a homogeneous entity. It is undermined by figures such as Rae, a Scottish Islamic scholar of Middle East history, or Yasmin, Rae's secretary and Sammar's friend who has Pakistani parents but was born and grew up in Great Britain. Both are in-between-characters and situated between the different cultures. This will be analysed further below, in association to the figure of Rae Isles and his connection to Sammar. Therefore, these two characters are also examples of Welsch's idea of cultural hybrids. In addition to that, Aboulela shows the influence the Western and African culture have on each other – a Westernisation of Africa can be seen just as clearly as the Africanization of the Western world – through the eyes of her heroine who experiences a change within certain traditions. Sammar's aunt's household in Sudan serves as an example of cultural mixing at a material level.

It is characterized by Miranda, 7Up and Coke bottles as well as "Nivea cream, the blue tin of luxury that came with a German ad on TV" (Aboulela 2001: 45). These products stand for the influence of the West on Sudanese culture, which does not appear as a homogenous entity delimited from the outside (Cooper 2008: 50). Aboulela's understanding of culture as transcultural is the basis of her heroine's personality and situatedness in-between cultures. Insofar as Sammar's identity is transcultural to begin with, it may make it easier for the character to deal with the life between Sudan and Scotland. For this analysis it is crucial to move away from Herder's classic idea of cultures – as also carried forward by Jandt and Klopf – as units that have clear and impermeable boundaries. Nevertheless, the term interculturality will not be abandoned as such but needs to be readjusted in the sense that it refers to a transcultural world with blurring boundaries between different cultures.

After Sammar has lost her husband in a car accident and is left alone with their baby, Amir, she decides to leave the child in the care of Tarig's mother, Mahasen, who is living in Khartoum. Sammar herself has gone back to Scotland, where the first part of the novel takes place and where she is working as a translator for the University of Aberdeen. She falls in love with Rae Isles, the university professor for whom she does translations, and they soon have to face cultural and religious differences that divide them from each other. Sammar goes back to Khartoum and decides to stay with her stepmother and son until Rae comes back into her life. These events show Sammar's confrontation with interculturality on different levels – she is living between Khartoum and Aberdeen, in love with a British man whilst her son is raised in Sudan.

The specific plot of the novel highlights intercultural concerns in a way that echoes academic analyses of cultural experience, but also uniquely poses different questions and answers. For example, how do the diverse-lived realities of individuals contrast with theoretical ideas about intercultural encounters? What impact does interculturality have on the experience of being a stranger, on the notion of home, or on the desire to belong? More pointedly, in the context of a with romantic love at its heart, how does desire shape interculturality or how does interculturality shape desire? How does the protagonist's central religious self-reflection fit in with the concept of culture? What role does literature play in this context and how does it not only represent examples of intercultural encounters, but also propose new ways of resolving cultural tensions? Leila Aboulela's novel seems to be deeply linked with these theoretical questions as it enables one to gain an insight into interculturality from a different point of view.

At Home in Love: The Global Stranger and Belonging

The female protagonist of *The Translator* appears as a global stranger who is in constant search of a home. She incorporates the same features that characterize the prototype of a stranger as outlined by the sociologist Georg Simmel. Additionally, she carries within herself a desire to belong and to be at home which connects her with the ideas of Rosemary Marangoly George. However, she does not seem to find this home in either place – neither in the alien British culture nor in her native country, Sudan. Home for Sammar can be found in love and, more significantly, in her belief in God. "In faith, nostalgia is fulfilled, not by offering a geographical sense of belonging to a particular location, but by stilling this longing for home in a spiritual sense" (Steiner 2008: 15). It proves highly productive to consider the first section of the novel, which takes place in Scotland, through the lens of Georg Simmel's concept of 'the Stranger' and the second part of the novel through George's ideas about home and belonging.

In Aberdeen, Sammar is a cultural stranger. According to Simmel's concept, a stranger is defined as being a "wanderer […] who comes today and stays tomorrow" (185). This suggests that strangers are not historically, socially, or culturally connected with the place they find themselves in; they do not originally belong to it. They are somewhat part of the outside world and at the same time attached to the inside of the new society, have a fixed position in it and interact with its members (184f). This dimension is illustrated, for example, at the beginning of the novel, where Sammar and Rae are walking through a garden in Aberdeen with "[t]ropical plants cramped in the damp warmth and orange fish in running water. Whistling birds flying indoors, the grey sky irrelevant above the glass ceiling" (Aboulela 2001: 4). The greenhouse in the Scottish "Duthie Park" (3) with its foreign plants, animals and alien climate is a perfect example of the amalgamation of proximity and distance. The tropical garden, just

like Sammar, is a display of the outside, but at the same time, it represents the foreign fauna and flora through a British perspective and is, thus, part of the inside. Sammar incorporates these characteristics of Simmel's stranger.

Simmel regards the stranger from the perspective of the society. He foregrounds this experience from a point of view that lies inside the culture looking out at the foreigner. However, in *The Translator* the focus does not lie on how Sammar appears to the Scottish 'natives'. It is mostly the protagonist who experiences herself as a stranger. Thus, the heroine is the main focaliser, but one who self-consciously imagines how others see her as a foreigner. This shifting perspective on the stranger requires some flexibility in the analysis. Simmel's concept of the stranger includes the two components of remoteness and nearness. Firstly, it can be seen how Sammar as a stranger in Aberdeen represents the feature of distance. She carries with her the feeling of being foreign in the sense that she does not really belong to this place, its culture, its belief and behavioural patterns, even though she was born in Aberdeen and has a British passport. It is "another world" (Aboulela 2001: 21) for her as her life and identity is strongly shaped by Sudanese culture and the religion of Islam.

> "In Aboulela's fiction, particularly in her novel *The Translator*, the alien and fragmented world of exile is countered by nostalgic dreams of rootedness and cultural tradition, which stem from the culture of origin and are fuelled by sensual memories of a youth spent in the Sudan. The contrast in the fiction between a present of dislocation and the memories of a better past allows Aboulela to use nostalgia as a tool to criticise of Western culture and as a defence mechanism against acculturation" (Steiner 2008: 13).

As shown in Steiner's analysis, Sammar shows a deep feeling of uprootedness and dislocation, a longing for home, and a nostalgic sentiment. The contrasting weather conditions of her

home country and Scotland are often given as a symbol of her alienation in the British environment. The Arab-African woman has "to shiver with incomprehension and suffer as every inadequately dressed African suffers in the alien British cold" (Aboulela 2001: 65). Contrastingly, Sammar often longs for the warm climate, the sun and the sky of Khartoum. Also, with regards to personal relations, she experiences the differences between her and others, which makes her a stranger in Aberdeen. This becomes visible, for example, in the relation to Lesley, an elderly lady who lives in the same house as the novel's main character, whom "Sammar had addressed […] as Aunt once out of politeness" (31). This seems strange to Lesley, which can be seen in her reaction as she "had replied, taken aback, 'I'm not your aunt,' […] 'Call me Lesley'" (32).

This incident shows Sammar's cultural distance. Her habit of addressing an unfamiliar elderly person as 'Aunt' is not common in British culture and exposes her as a stranger. According to Sammar's Sudanese background, however, it is an act of politeness and respect. Another example of the main character's cultural remoteness is her relation to Diane, a British student that shares her office with Sammar. "Diane was [...] nearly eight years her junior and so independent in comparison to how Sammar had been at that age. Independent and a […] source of culture shock" (72). When comparing herself to Diane, the female protagonist notices her difference to those who are 'insiders' of the Scottish culture and society. She imagines how she must appear as a complete outsider and stranger. Diane seems to be the complete opposite to Sammar. The Scottish student is characterized by the fast food products she likes to consume: "her usual accessories of pens, Diet Coke, Yorkie bars, a ham and pickle sandwich" (72).

These items seem to symbolize the differences between Sammar's culture, which is characterized in terms of foods that

must be carefully prepared, illustrated by "sacks of dried vegetables, tins from faraway places, […] chili sauce and tins of beans, the ingredients written out in Arabic, packed in a warm place on another continent" (66), as well as by her homemade soup that she cooks for Rae. These objects, which distinguish the two female characters, are a clear indication of the cultural differences between them (Cooper 2008: 48-54). They symbolically show Sammar's culturally remote position as a stranger as outlined by Georg Simmel.

After exploring the main character's distance from society, however, it can also be seen that she incorporates Simmel's contrasting idea of being 'near', which forms the combination of remoteness and proximity in the stranger. The heroine is 'near' in the sense of being a part of society because of the fact that she has a job and speaks English. However, when the main character of the story was first confronted with British culture, she experienced "culture shocks. Things that jarred – an earring on a man's earlobe, a woman walking a dog big enough to swallow the infant she was at the same time pushing in a pram, the huge billboards on the roads" (Aboulela 2001: 71).

However, she adapts to the new culture quickly and gets used to these impressions:

> "Now Sammar did not notice these things, did not gaze at them, alarmed, as she had done years before. Her eyes had grown numb over the years and she had found out, gradually, and felt reassured, that she was not alone, that not everyone believed what the billboards said, not everyone understood why that woman kept such a large ferocious dog in her home" (71).

This indicates that Sammar, as a stranger, is not only distant from British society, but also a part of it as she familiarises herself with the new culture and learns that other people have similar views to hers.

Furthermore, Simmel refines his theory by identifying closeness as that concept formed out of human universals, which at the same time, creates a feeling of remoteness. This distance comes into being "insofar as these similarities extend beyond him and us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people" (187). However, this also means that the stranger is close because of common features of a national, social, occupational or generally human nature. This aspect can be explored, again, by using the example of the relation between Sammar and Diane. On a more general level, Sammar feels close to Diane. She can imagine her as a close friend. At the same time, however, the universality of these connecting points, which are too broad to create intimate bonds, and the cultural differences between the two women make Sammar feel distanced from her. This can be seen, for example, when the two female characters talk about their future plans and the idea of marriage.

In this situation, Sammar imagines that if she had "been back home and Diane one of her old friends, she would have replied, 'Are you mad? You want to live celibate all your life!' and they both would have started laughing. Here, she just said quietly to Diane, 'Maybe you'll change your mind and get married one day'" (Aboulela 2001: 73). Although Sammar is close to Diane because of more general similarities, they are nevertheless remote because of the fact that these characteristics are not unique for their relation.

Another aspect mentioned by Simmel is the stranger's opportunity to leave again (184-188). Sammar always has the option to return to Sudan, which becomes clear when she accepts Rae's offer to visit home, decides to stay in Khartoum and therefore leaves her British life behind: "'I'm not going to have a job to go back to. I'm here today to write my letter of resignation and send it off.'" (152). Drawing upon Simmel's theory, Sammar is the "potential wanderer" (185). She is, although part of Western

society, not as strongly bound to it as its indigenous members. As a stranger she has "the freedom of coming and going" (185).
Even though it is this essay's intention to focus on the inter- and transculturality of the female protagonist, it is interesting that Simmel's idea of the stranger is also relevant to the figure of Rae Isles. When Sammar and Yasmin talk about Rae after visiting him at home, Sammar states: "'Rae is different,' [….] He's sort of familiar, like people from back home'" (Aboulela 2001: 21). His occupation and interests, his knowledge about Islam and his appearance are features that set him apart from a stereotyped image of a Westerner, such as Diane.

Thus, he is, to some extent, a stranger within his own culture. At the same time, he is intensively connected to and enrooted in the British culture and, thus, not an obvious example of Simmel's notion of the stranger. This becomes visible when Sammar is thinking of him on Christmas Day: "Sammar felt separate from him, exiled while he was in his homeland, fasting while he was eating turkey and drinking wine. They lived in worlds divided by simple facts – religion, country of origin, race – data that fills forms" (34). This extract does not only show Rae's attachment to Western culture, it underlines the main character's feeling of being a stranger and not fitting in because of 'simple facts'. Rae can be understood as an example of a transcultural personality who, to some extent, also corresponds with Simmel's model of a stranger.

These facets of being a stranger as defined by Simmel stand in close connection to the notion of home as explored by George and her analysis of the "gap between the realities and the idealizations that have made 'home' such an auratic term" (1999: 1f). Being a stranger and being at home seem to be opposites. However, it is more complex than that. As a stranger, one might refer to a place as home even though it does not include the feeling of being at home. Also for Sammar, home is an ambivalent term. It is closely related to the feeling of belonging and includes

the principle of in- and exclusion, of differentiating between the self and the other. Thus, it can be argued that the notion of home goes far beyond the simple meaning of a place to reside at (George 19f). This can be seen on the example of the novel's main character and her relation to the idea of being at home.

Sammar seems to be constantly longing for this feeling of being at home; she "had not been in a real home for a long time. She lived in a room with nothing on the wall, nothing personal, no photographs, no books; just like a hospital room" (Aboulela 2001: 16). This passage indicates that the protagonist does not feel at home in her apartment and in Scotland in general. She cannot identify herself with the place, which is indicated by the fact that there are no 'personal' belongings of Sammar that would make the room a homely place. As outlined above, the protagonist cannot feel at home, as she does not experience belonging and safety. On the contrary, the depiction of her room as a 'hospital room' highlights her loneliness, isolation and emotional illness. This idiom of the 'hospital room' appears several times throughout the novel and emphasizes the aspect of feeling uncomfortable and strange in the Scottish environment.

While being in Scotland, she often refers to Khartoum and her aunt's place as her home. Sammar seems to feel a deep longing for this place. However, it occurs that her feeling of being at home changes and seems to become mixed up, so that Scotland feels like home sometimes:

> "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 stray dogs among the street's rubble and pot-holes. [….] But this was Scotland and the reality left her dulled, unsure of herself. […] home had never come here before" (Aboulela 2001: 21).

Something has caused Sammar to experience home in Aberdeen where she is a stranger. It becomes more and more obvious that her relation to the idea of home seems to be independent from an actual space. When she recalls her time in Scotland with Tarig, she refers to the 'home' they created (9). Even more significantly, the 'hospital room' becomes a real home for her triggered by her love for Rae and the hope he embodies. For the first time since losing her husband and being alone in Scotland, she is able to shrug off her numbness, escape her shocked state and take her life into her own hands again. Symbolic of that change within the main character are the new curtains that "changed the room, changed the light in it. [….] she realized that they were like the curtains Rae had described to her […] She had unconsciously chosen these colours, the same colours he had talked about" (69). It becomes clear that Sammar's idea of home has not much to do with the actual geographical position, society or culture she finds herself in (Cooper 2008: 51f; Steiner 2008: 8f). Most importantly, Aboulela's heroine seems to find home in the feeling of love; firstly, in her love for Tarig and now in her love for Rae.

These male characters in the protagonist's life enable her to experience the feeling of belonging and of safety – facets that, according to George, characterize the state of being at home. This can be seen clearly when a phone call from Rae puts her in a state of happiness and creates a warm feeling of being at home. Once again, she has an illusion but this time it comes without a clash with reality: "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" (Aboulela 2001: 41).

Furthermore, this feeling of being at home, which is triggered through her love for Rae, is expressed in the situation when Sammar asks Rae to convert to Islam, so that they can get married. This happens only a day before she is supposed to leave

for Egypt on an assignment. She imagines the different scenarios and their implications for her life: "If he said no, she would walk out on to the snow, an exile she would take with her wherever she went" (127). The metaphor of the 'exile' that she would carry around explains the idea of love as a home again and more clearly than ever before. His rejection of love would set Sammar in a state of ever-lasting homelessness, would turn her into a stranger in every place, just as she experienced it after the loss of her deceased husband. Once more, one can see that the main character's experience of belonging and attachment is almost independent from the place, culture or society in which she finds herself.

Sammar embodies a transcultural personality as described by Welsch. She does not have a strong bond to one culture but contains qualities of both societies she is living in.

She also incorporates the features of Simmel's stranger, as she is close and distant at the same time. Nevertheless, the novel seems to go even further as it redefines home and belonging in psychological terms. It shows Sammar as a global stranger and her feeling of being at home is triggered through inter-personal relationships and belief systems rather than a cultural or geographical situatedness. Only by reassuring herself in terms of being loved, the main character is no longer in search for a home or craving for a place to belong to. When she loves and is being loved, home can be simply everywhere.

This phenomenon becomes even more apparent, in the second part of the novel, which is set in Khartoum. The structure of the novel with its two different sections underlines the clash of cultures, with which the protagonist is confronted. When recalling her childhood memories of going to Africa for the first time, the situation seems to reverse the present context. Spending the first seven years of her life in Scotland, Sudan was a foreign country for her: "Home was a vague place, a jumble of what her mother said.

Home was a grey and white place like in the photographs of her cousins" (Aboulela 2001: 47). Sammar does not have a strong and 'natural' bond to Khartoum at first. Things like the interior decor are "[s]trange for Sammar. She was used to the unobtrusive carpets and wood of London's flats" (49).

Nevertheless, she adapts quickly to the Sudanese culture and soon learns to experience this as her home. Furthermore, it is important that she had her family around. Her memories of that time are strongly shaped by the people she is with such as Tarig, his sister Hanan and mother Mahasen. Sammar's early life forms part of a retrospective narrative and underlines the ways in which Sammar's idea of home is, from the beginning, not connected to a place.

The protagonist's relation to Sudanese culture seems to be somewhat ambivalent. This leads again to Simmel's notion of the stranger. To begin with, Sammar experiences a nearness to the Sudanese culture. As mentioned before, she has a deep longing and a feeling of homesickness for Khartoum while she is in Scotland. When Sammar is back in Sudan, surrounded by her family, in the warm climate she was missing so badly, it seems, at first, as if her longing and desire for being at home is fulfilled. The protagonist herself feels that her "homesickness was cured" (146). This clearly indicates that Sammar feels a deep pleasure about being back in Khartoum; that she feels at home at this place and in this culture. This can also be seen in another scene. There the process of adapting to the Sudanese environment is described in physical terms, laying a focus on her body and bodily changes.

> "Sammar sat on the porch and there was no breeze, no moisture in the air, all was heat, dryness, desert dust. Her bones were content with that, supple again, young. They had forgotten how they used to be clenched. Her skin too had darkened from the sun, cleared and forgotten wool and gloves. She waited for everything else to forget: the inside of her and her eyes. Her eyes had let her down, they were not as strong as they had been in the past, not as strong as the eyes of those who had not travelled north" (Aboulela 2001: 138).

This passage outlines clearly that Sammar experiences ambivalence. Again, the weather is an important symbol and indicator of her situation. The climate descriptions contrast the difference between cold and snowy Europe and the hot, dry desert of Africa in drastic terms. Additionally, Sammar's physical adaptation to the climate dominates this extract. The personification of different body parts is used to describe her mood. For example, 'her bones' are pleased by the warmth and have 'forgotten' the cold and 'her skin' is darker and has 'forgotten' about the warm clothing needed in the rough Scottish winter. This shows her re-adaptation to Sudanese culture. Furthermore, it underlines that she is feeling comfortable. Finally, Sammar seems to be at the place she was longing for and shows Simmel's notion of the stranger's proximity.

However, this scene also illustrates that the different life she was living in Aberdeen has influenced her a lot. Thus, it also shows Simmel's second component of being a stranger – the feature of distance. It can be seen that Sammar is in the process of familiarizing herself with her new home and tries to leave the Scottish life behind as 'she waited for everything else to forget'. This becomes even clearer when we look at the personification of 'her eyes' that 'let her down' and are not as good as the eyes of those who have not travelled to Europe. Because of her experience of living in another culture, Sammar differs from other people in her hometown. 'Her eyes' that have lost their strength show a bodily transformation and symbolise a change in her personality, an imprint that is left behind from her life in Scotland. She is not exactly the same Sammar she has been before living in Aberdeen. Somehow, she is a changed person, not only physically but also personally. Her aunt points this out to her in quite drastic terms when she says: "'In the past you were lively and strong, now you've just become an idiot'" (172).

It is necessary to consider that the relation between the two women is very tense because of the death of Mahasen's son. That plays an important role in this scene as Mahasen blames the heroine for Tarig's death. Nevertheless, this extract also shows that Sammar is more distanced from her family and the Sudanese culture in general. She "brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it" (Simmel 185) and therefore shows the characteristics of a stranger in her home country.

However, it is not only Sammar herself who has gone through a change, which leads to the experience of foreignness. It is also her hometown that is no longer the same. Thus, it is not as familiar to the heroine as it used to be. One example of that is her memory of sleeping on the roof under a beautiful sky, a memory that made her homesick for Khartoum while she was in Aberdeen. Now that she is back, she is confronted with the reality that things have changed. "Hanan had built her flat on the roof. 'No one, Sammar,' she said, 'sleeps outdoors anymore'" (146). When meeting her brother, Waleed, she comes to a similar realisation. Waleed confronts her with this, when they talk about memories of the past and their habit to watch movies at the cinema. "'Things change. You want to go away and come back and find everything the same?'" (150).

He outlines that the town, people's habits, the culture itself have developed in Sammar's absence. Thus, even in Sudan, Sammar is like Simmel's stranger. However, Sammar's situation in Sudan is not comparable with the alienation she has felt in Aberdeen. Sammar is not a complete stranger to Sudanese culture, the climate and her relatives but, at the same time she has to face the changes that have taken place within herself, her family and within the society. The time that she spent in Scotland has distanced her, to some degree, from her home culture and turns her into a global stranger.

Another important aspect is that Sammer "retains the freedom of coming and going" (Rogers 1999: 61), which is also typical for Simmel's stranger. It is even expected from her to leave again. Aunt Mahasen makes this clear to Sammar in a for the protagonist hurtful conversation: "'You should go back to England, work there and send us things'" (Aboulela 2001 172). Her brother also expresses the belief that Sammar should and will return to Europe. "'I'll give you a couple more weeks,' he said, 'you'll take Amir and run back.' [....] 'Of course you have to go back to your job in Aberdeen'" (153ff). These aspects show Sammar's remoteness from her family and the life in Sudan. These paragraphs indicate that she carries the characteristics of the stranger not only in the British, but also in the Sudanese culture.

It seems as if Sammar's situation in Khartoum and her own emotions about it are ambivalent, which leads again to the notion of home as explored above. On the one hand, she does experience belonging; she fits into the society and circumstances around her. She also feels content and can finally be at the place she was longing for. She enjoys being close to her family and friends, and especially the bond to her son, Amir, grows strong again. On the other hand, it becomes clear that even within Sudanese culture she has some of the features of Simmel's prototype of a stranger. She does not seem to be able to adapt fully to the situation and the reason for that is Rae. She seems to be overburdened in a lot of situations. "She poured sour milk in her aunt's tea and had to make another cup. She sent Amir to school without making him brush his teeth, left the fan running in the empty bedroom all morning. At work she felt that she didn't care, it didn't matter at all that her adult students could barely read and write" (169).

As much as she enjoys being back in the environment and culture she was longing for so badly, it is hard to forget Rae. When she has overcome her yearning for Khartoum and is back in the

place she has called her home, she develops a longing to be back in Aberdeen and close to Rae. "[S]he dreamt of him. [....] And Sammar found herself nostalgic for her old job, the work itself [...] She missed Diane, the smell of her cheese and onion crisps [...] This was the exile from him then. Never hearing his name. Living in a place where no one knew him" (166f). This passage indicates the main character's longing for her Scottish life and Rae, as all the things she is missing stand in connection to him. Ironically, one aspect that has marked one of the biggest cultural differences is now something that she is thinking of and longing for – Diane and the smell of her chips. At the same time that she feels at home in her culture and her familiar place, she feels 'exiled' from Rae and her home that she has found in love. Her thoughts and especially her dreams about him are the reason why she acts ineffectively and seems overstrained. "She kept busy so that there would not be pauses in the day to dwell. She tired herself so that there would not be dreams at night" (163). She feels the need to exhaust herself to concentrate on other things apart from thinking about him.

The feeling of missing Rae, of being expelled from the home she has found in him, causes a corporeal pain. It was "[o]nly a dream and it could induce nausea in her, a dry soreness behind her eyes" (169). This is underlined further by the fact that she is not able to talk to anyone about him, worries about the reactions of friends and family and, thus, becomes alienated from them even further (167f). Sammar herself identifies this problem in the last conversation with Rae before leaving Aberdeen: "'I was homesick for the place, how everything looked. But I don't know what kind of sickness it would be, to be away from you'" (128). Even though Aboulela's heroine identifies with Khartoum as a place more than with Aberdeen and feels much closer to the Sudanese culture than the British customs, she has a deep longing for Rae who conveys home for Sammar through love.

As described earlier in this essay, her affection for the Scottish professor is very important for the protagonist to develop the feeling of belonging and of being at home. Sammar, as a global stranger, is unable to belong fully to a place or culture if the main trigger of feeling at home is missing – if she is exiled from love.

"Aboulela distinguishes quite clearly between the longing for a geographical place and a spiritual home" (Steiner 2008: 16). This suggests that the feeling of being at home, of belonging and being a stranger are not only influenced by culture narrowly defined. In a more and more globalized world, in which intercultural encounters are a daily phenomenon and societies are seen as transcultural structures, the individual seems to be at the centre of attention. As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, formerly safe categories become more and more blurred and lose their clear shape. Home seems to be becoming a psychological place, belonging can be experienced in the most alien environment and one can turn into a stranger even towards one's own family.

Religion and the Comfort of Strangers: "The World as one Cohesive Place"

One aspect that should also be considered, when analysing Aboulela's novel, is the role of religion. Islam shapes Sammar's belief and behavioural patterns; it is decisive for her emotions and actions, which is outlined by Steiner in her essay on "Strategic nostalgia, Islam and cultural translation" (2008) in Aboulela's writing. It seems difficult to put religion in its proper place as it is often excluded in theoretical approaches regarding trans- or interculturality.

However, it is not possible to overlook the importance of religion in Aboulela's text. The novel presents the idea of religion as a transcendent and central determinant of behaviour, of thinking and emotions, at least for its Muslim heroine. Aboulela's writings

"demonstrate over and over again that prayer, faith rituals, association with the community of believers and studying the Qur'an and the Hadiths are possible in whichever geographical location her characters find themselves" (Steiner 2008: 13). This aspect underlines that Sammar is driven and shaped by her faith as a Muslim.

Furthermore, it could be argued that religion is not only a part of the protagonist's culture; it is culture itself. For Aboulela there is no culture outside of religion:

> "In an interview, Aboulela stated that she wants to communicate in her fiction not merely the intellectual knowledge of Islam, 'but also the psychology, state of mind and emotions or a person who has faith'. She is 'interested in going deep, not just looking at 'Muslim' as a cultural or political identity but something close to the centre'" (Cooper 2008: 52).

The protagonist of the novel does not seem to have a strong bond to one specific culture. Even though she considers Sudan as her home and its culture as her home culture, she experiences alienation and has problems in re-adapting completely. She is looking for a home in love and finds it, independent of place, society and culture. According to this understanding of home, it becomes clear that religion is another home for Aboulela's protagonist; it gives her a feeling of security and normality, of belonging and inclusion independent from a place or culture she finds herself in.

> "Nostalgia therefore does not always enable the characters to form sound judgements of their new environment or even of their real homes in the source culture, as the longing for and dreaming of home sometimes covers reality with a golden patina. Aboulela is aware of this particular danger of nostalgic fantasy. For this reason, she allows her character a return to her home in Khartoum, where suddenly nothing is quite as fulfilling as imagined. And this is also the point at which Aboulela foregrounds the transnationality and universality of Islam" (Steiner 2008: 14).

Sammar experiences "[d]ays in which the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers. They were the only challenge, the last touch with normality, without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day and night" (Aboulela 2001: 16). After the loss of her husband, the novel's main character seems to be exiled from love. In those difficult days, the only thing that gives her stability and offers her a home is her religion.

Additionally, she experiences a foreign country and its alien lifestyle; alien because it does not include Islam. Even though it is not always shown explicitly that the lack of Muslim religion in Scotland is the reason for her experience of alienation, it is indicated in most situations. In connection with her habit of praying, in particular, it becomes visible that religion is an important determinant for the feeling of being a stranger in the Western world:

> "It had seemed strange for her when she first came to live here, all that privacy that surrounded praying. She was used to praying in the middle of parties, in places where others chatted, slept or read. However, she was aware now, after having lived in this city for many years she could understand, how surprised people would be were they to turn the corner of a building and find someone with their forehead, nose and palms touching the ground" (76)
>
> "Time to pray and the sadness that there was nowhere to pray in the airport, if she stood up and prayed in the corner, people would have a fit. A story once told by Yasmin: Turks in London praying in Terminal 1 and someone called the police (133)."

These two passages indicate that religion plays a major role in the protagonist's alienation from Scottish society and culture. Furthermore, it becomes obvious that it is a situation where the feeling of being a stranger develops from both perspectives – the inside and the outside. On the one hand, it is strange for her that Islam is not part of British culture and she feels distanced from Western society. On the other hand, she is regarded as a stranger

by others because of her religious practices as the example of praying in the airport shows. People seem to be offended by her belief and stigmatize her as a foreigner. This dual process of being a stranger becomes clear, in particular, with regards to the aspect of religion. It is Aboulela's main character herself who experiences the cultural differences and feels like a stranger. Only in a few situations is she the one who gets isolated by others – and these situations seem to revolve around her relation to Islam.

It is clear that religion functions as a determinant in Sammar's life and is, thus, also decisive for her experience of foreignness. This becomes clear when regarding her relation to Diane again. Diane's reaction, for example, to the news that Rae is in hospital does not follow Sammar's behavioural pattern in any way. On the contrary, the main character interprets Diane's response to the news as rude and painful. It can be seen that "[t]he style that Sammar would have appreciated is the Muslim comforting phrase that is evoked at such a time and which provides words as bulwarks against life's hurts" (Cooper 2008: 47). Thus, it is a cultural difference between the two female figures that is shaped by religious beliefs. One could carry on and point out that the ham on Diane's sandwich, as a forbidden food for Muslims, underlines this distance even further (47f). Consequently, it can be seen that a lot of details that make Sammar appear as Simmel's kind of stranger point back to her faith. It influences her way of interacting with others and, in the end, is more important than her love for Rae.

The aspect that her religious belief is stronger than her love for Rae underlines, again Sammar's position as a stranger. Once more, there is a correlation with Simmel's theory as the protagonist incorporates "freedom" (185) and "mobility" (186), which she finds in Islam. Because of her faith, she is Simmel's 'wanderer' and leaves Rae as well as the British culture behind.

The main character's bond to religion is stronger than her love for Rae and she is not able to sacrifice her religion for him.

Consequently, it seems as if religion is the only home for Sammar, a home that she cannot be exiled from as she carries her faith deep inside. Aboulela depicts a "transnational vision of Islam, which is not bound to a particular location and which accommodates movement and change" (Steiner 2008: 8). When reciting her prayers "the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinters inside her coming together" (Aboulela 2001: 75). A symbol for her belief, in material terms, is her prayer mat that seems to go with her wherever she goes.

In a way, we can see that Islam is an important aspect for Sammar's feeling of belonging to Sudan:

> "[S]he heard from a distance the sunset azan. She had missed it in Aberdeen, felt its absence, sometimes fancied she heard it in the rumble of the central-heating pipes, in a sound coming from a neighbouring flat. It now came as a relief, the reminder that there was something bigger than all this, above everything" (145).

Again, this passage shows how religion shapes the protagonist's experience of alienation or belonging. It is the aspect of a shared religious belief in the Sudanese culture that seems to bring her closer to it. Thus, the novel shows that religion, just as well as love, offers Sammar a home independent of place, society or culture (Steiner 2001: 7-16). In Scotland, even though it stands for the Western world and the Christian belief pattern, she feels surrounded by Islam. She experiences that "[h]ere in Scotland she was learning more about her own religion, the world was one cohesive place" (Aboulela 2001: 109). This underlines that her religion offers her a feeling of safety and inclusion wherever she is. Furthermore, this extract of the novel brings Welsch's concept of transculturality back to mind. Sammar experiences with regards to

her religion what he develops within his theory, namely, that 'the world is one cohesive place' and boundaries between cultures become more and more insubstantial.

Moreover, Brendan Smyth' and Sadia Abbas' readings of the novel suggest that Rae plays an important role for Sammar's relation to Islam:

> "Several times, Sammar remarks that Rae teaches her things about Islam that she doesn't know" (Smyth 2007: 172). "She translates Arabic texts for Rae, and the novel implies that she translates Islam into a properly *felt* system of beliefs for him. [….] The novel's more striking suggestion is that he translates Islam back to her, that she learns more about Islam from him than she did in Sudan" (Abbas 2011: 437).

This understanding gains even more importance when regarding the end of the novel. In a way, Rae is a trigger for Sammar to re-think her relation to religion, to him and to herself. Suddenly, the protagonist realises that her own behaviour has not served her religious belief:

> "There were people who drew others to Islam. People with deep faith, the type who slept little at night, had an energy in them. [....] Someone influencing someone, with no ego involved. And she, when she spoke to Rae, wanting this and that, full of it; [...] She had never, not once, prayed that he would become a Muslim for his own sake, for his own good. It had always been for herself, her need to get married again, not be alone" (Aboulela 2001: 179).

Only after being aware of this, the novel can end with a feeling of contentment. Rae converts to Islam and takes Sammar back to Aberdeen, where she can now fully feel at home – in his love and their shared faith. After all, the home that Sammar finds in his love can only be reached through the home that both of them discover in religion. They are both global strangers and transcultural individuals, who need one another to achieve a greater self-realisation: Sammar enables Rae to come to a

confession not only of his belief in Islam but also of his love for her. Rae, however, is able to encourage Sammar to re-define her relation to Islam and her motives for love.

In *The Translator*, the Sudanese author explores concepts of belonging, the feeling of alienation, of being a global stranger and of experiencing home in faith and in love. Aboulela embeds the idea of a transcultural globalized world, in which the concept of culture needs to be reassessed and rewritten. The idea of cultures as closed entities does not seem appropriate any longer, which is underlined by the novel's insightful and detailed descriptions of both the Sudanese and Scottish culture. The main characters, Sammar and Rae, are perfect examples of these culturally hybrid, transcultural individuals. With this novel, Aboulela gives a touching and realistic inside into the life and difficulties of a Muslim migrant woman who faces the challenges of interculturality by living between African Muslim Sudan and Western secular Scotland.

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- Luisa Rath