

# TRANSFORMATION OF THE SELF THROUGH ISLAMIC PRACTICES IN LEILA ABOULELA'S *THE TRANSLATOR*

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the practice of religious rituals and doctrines and the effects that these have on the protagonist of Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*. Although it is a love story that highlights the challenges of a relationship between a young and devout Muslim widow and an agnostic Scottish man, I suggest that the novel's focus is on the spiritual journey that the protagonist goes through. She is portrayed as a selfish individual who uses religion mainly as an escape from her tragic life, and she has a flawed belief that she can only feel fulfilled if she becomes a wife again. In return, this belief causes her to be deprived of a contented life, as adherence to religious practices is not only a sign of piety but also a means towards gaining the capacity for self-improvement. This is based on Saba Mahmood's analytical framework of piety that emphasizes the connection between the performance of religious actions and the creation of a moralistic self. In an extension to Mahmood's argument, using Alison Weir's suggestion that religious practices must have a clear purpose towards God, I further argue that the protagonist's religiosity lacks the focus on God. Her desire to be married again suggests a strong dependency on the men in her life, which contradicts her devotion to God, as it demonstrates her inability to put God at the center of her life. This restrains her abilities to improve her life and, more importantly, it inhibits the creation of a relationship with the Divine. The novel therefore suggests that a complete sense of the self can only be achieved when one is able to relinquish worldly desires and depends only on God.

## Keywords

Muslim women writers; Leila Aboulela; Saba Mahmood; religious actions

## About the Author

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## WRITING ABOUT THE FAITH

Leila Aboulela has made a name as a British-Muslim writer of Sudanese descent. Her works of fiction add on to the established genre of British diasporic literature, often dealing with the challenges of migration, particularly in carving a space for belonging. What makes them stand out is the fact that her Muslim protagonists are capable and successful in overcoming alienation and displacement by creating a new identity, largely due to their commitment to Islam. She portrays how religious actions such as praying and fasting can help facilitate this process. This brings forth the focus on the practical aspect of Islam and how it can be developed and solidified in a secular environment, going beyond the dichotomy of Islam versus the West. The protagonists in her novels look at being “Muslim’ [not only] as a cultural or political identity but something close to the center, something that transcends but does not deny gender, nationality, class and race” (“Leila Aboulela”).

The focus on religious identity in her creative works is a reflection of Aboulela’s own subjectivity and experience. Islam, for her, is of utmost importance as it “provides more stability than national identity... [as she can carry it] everywhere [she goes]” (Sethi, “Keep the Faith”). In fact, Aboulela personally describes herself as a practicing Muslim who first wore the hijab in London. This is a decision made easier in a non-Western environment as she was away from other Muslim friends who would have talked her out of it (Sethi, “Keep the Faith”). Although the decision was initially prompted by unwanted attention that she was receiving from strangers, she also describes it as an expression of the Qur’anic doctrine that defines the relationship between men and women, thus espousing a spiritual entity of the self which seeks to represent the faith she believes in (Akbar, “Back to Khartoum”). Ironically, the liberal and secular environment of the Western world opens a space for a devout Muslim to carry out her beliefs by providing her a surrounding that is free from judgement.

Aboulela explores the Muslim-West relations in a unique manner in *The Translator*, her first novel, published in 1999.<sup>1</sup> It is a narrative of a Muslim woman’s personal struggle between love and religious commitment in an environment full of bereavement and loss. Sammar, a young Sudanese widow, is working as a translator at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Despite the four years that have passed since losing her husband in a car accident in the city, she is still mourning his death and is emotionally decapitated. She cannot find the strength to move on with her life, and she imposes a self-exile in the cold city, distancing herself from both family members in Sudan and from the society in Scotland. This changes as she falls in love with her boss, Rae Isles, a twice-divorced scholar of Middle East politics. However, the relationship proves to be complex. Despite Rae’s understanding and interests in Islam and his love for her, he expresses no interest in becoming a Muslim. This

is a problem for Sammar who, as a devout Muslim woman, believes that a believer cannot marry a non-believer. These complexities are only resolved when he converts to Islam at the end of the novel, which Aboulela carefully highlights as a conversion done out of his own volition instead of the result of Sammar's influence on him. The novel therefore focuses on Sammar's enactment of her beliefs, which allows her to undergo a self-transformation by finding meaning and focus in life, and to translate Islam, its practices, and experience to the man that she loves.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE NOVEL

*The Translator's* emphasis on the Islamic faith has led many scholars to read it as a novel that presents the binary opposition between Islam and the West. Hassan, Butt and Steinitz have each pointed out that the romantic relationship between Sammar and Rae outlines a metaphorical representation of her job as a translator—where she not only finds herself translating Islam and Middle Eastern culture for his work, but also for his personal understanding. For these scholars, the difficulties faced by the inter-religious lovers highlight the untranslatability of Islam. While Rae's conversion is the author's rejection of "hybridization and withdraw[al] into an Islamic ideology of singleness and separation" (Steinitz 367), Sammar's religiosity is said to only focus on worship and personal dispositions, leading to the restriction of human agency and her lack of awareness of the political and social surroundings that she is living in (Hassan 314). Furthermore, her commitment to Islam is viewed as a complete willingness to do anything "under the sign of rendering her duty to Allah and keeping her character unpolluted" (Butt 173), under the assumption that the Western world only contains moral and spiritual decay.

These analyzes focus on Sammar's devotion as a political rather than personal act, leading to an understanding of Sammar's religiosity mainly as a form of resistance against the Western society that she is in. Consequently, this reading mainly sees the incompatibility of Islam and the West, where Sammar and Rae's relationship underlines a sense of power play; the latter's conversion is seen as a sign of subversion of power. The problem with such a perception, however, is that it suggests that the relationship is unequal and that Rae, as a secular white male scholar, cannot be affected by Sammar's love and the religiosity that she brings to their relationship. This ignores the fact that throughout the novel, Sammar views Rae as a savior from debilitating grief, while she, in turn, makes him feel "safe" (Aboulela 56). Ironically, this is the very perspective that Aboulela addresses through Rae's conversion, in which Rae himself says that he is taken aback by his need for help from a higher power as he "didn't think of [him]self as someone who would turn spiritual" (180). As Sammar can be self-rehabilitated through

her position as a translator which demands her to consider different worldviews (Osei-Nyame Jnr 101), Rae, too, must be transformed through his interaction with and love for her, as well as his long-standing interest in Islam. Thus, the novel is a work of fiction that presents a dialogue between the Islamic belief system and the Western liberal ideology by presenting “the Islamic way as a corrective to a particular set of circumstances” (Phillips 67).

Furthermore, by reading Sammar’s religious devotion as having a political undertone, the focus moves away from the individual self and the ability for religious actions to affect the individual self. As Edwin suggests, religious actions should be read as a method for “organizing daily life, thereby allowing a deeper appreciation of Sammar’s life with details of the enactment of religious faith on a daily basis” (65).<sup>2</sup> Here, these actions work as a structural component that helps to improve the life of a young, grieving widow, which is in itself an act of agency as it reflects her personal abilities to improve her life. In addition, this novel also presents the exilic conditions of the protagonist, who attempts to transform her feelings of displacement and dislocation through her Muslim faith, which inadvertently also transforms the person that she loves (Dimitriu 122). Islam, therefore, provides a sense of belonging as it allows these two characters to come together to create a place of their own, away from their old hostile environments (Steiner 23).

In this paper, I extend Edwin’s point mentioned above by focusing on the reasons behind the protagonist’s commitment to religious actions and the transformative effects these actions have on her. I begin by suggesting that although Sammar is portrayed as a pious Muslim woman, her religiosity is not without fault, and she is not an exemplary Muslim woman. There are two reasons behind this argument: The first is that her devotion to religion can be read as a desperate attempt to escape from grief rather than a conscious commitment to Islam. Secondly, she has a strong reliance on Tarig, her husband and later, on Rae. This defeats the purpose of worship, as religious devotion puts God at the center of the believer’s life, thereby suggesting a lack of focus in Sammar’s performance of religious rituals. It outlines a struggle between her desires and her duties as a Muslim, as it questions her commitment to God in her daily life. I then analyze how religious practices work towards overcoming these struggles by bringing her through a spiritual journey of self-discovery that allows her to shift her reliance on human beings (particularly the men in her life) to God. This includes the complex negotiation of her feelings for Rae with that of her belief in God. The path towards love is not easy in this novel; it is a struggle between what the heart wants and one’s duty as a Muslim. In order to provide a frame of reference to the arguments presented in this paper, I first refer to Saba Mahmood’s theorization of agency for Muslim women, which underscores religious actions as efforts to improve the believer’s daily life and to achieve a specific potential of the self. I also utilize Alison Weir’s suggestion for

Mahmood's framework to consider the performance of religious actions as the believer's effort to create a connection and relationship with God, thus positioning a higher being at the center of the believer's life.

### **PUTTING GOD AT THE CENTER OF RELIGIOUS ACTIONS**

Saba Mahmood's analytical framework of Muslim women's agency and piety is based on a two-year ethnographic study conducted in the 1990s of a group of women in downtown Cairo, Egypt, who are committed to various mosque activities throughout the city despite the availability of a more secular lifestyle. This conceptualization begins with the argument that the performance of religious actions have the ability to encourage the realization of the self, which will bring forth the enactment of agency that "must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity" (14). This establishes the connection between religious actions with that of everyday life, allowing for their exploration of meaning and purpose in a believer's life. Religious actions, therefore, are not perceived as a form of control, but as a method to achieve specific potentials (31).

In particular, Mahmood uses the concept of norms to refer to the repetition of both mundane and religious acts in a believer's daily life. The repetitive actions provides a space for the creation of a specific model of the self. This means that these actions, which are carried out for the purpose of self-improvement and norms, become the method for the self to acquire specific desired qualities. Furthermore, they open an avenue for the self to establish qualities to connect and respond to one's specific environment, which suggests that there are a "variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated" (23). Norms must then be understood as a form of control of one's individuality. Thus, believers must be understood to have specific agendas in their performance of religious acts, which highlights their commitment to achieve moralistic aims and a positive personal potential. This moves away from the perspective of religious norms as a form of restriction that controls one's life, pushing the discussion on religion away from the binary of resistance/subordination.

However, an important shortcoming in Mahmood's work is that the framework does not recognize the importance of God in the performance of religious actions. Adherence to religion is simply understood as:

individual efforts toward self-realization [that] are aimed not so much at discovering one's "true" desires and feelings, or at establishing a personal relationship with God, but

at honing one's rational and emotional capacities so as to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self (31).

There is an understatement of God's position in the performance of religious actions, which Alison Weir addresses in her essay. She suggests that Mahmood's analytical framework of piety must be extended beyond the self, in particular, to one's connection with God. This is the spiritual aspect of religion that has God at its center, which cannot be ignored as Islam is a tradition that focuses on the belief in a Higher Power. The Islamic doctrine looks at God as the only being that is worthy of worship, supported by the Qur'anic injunction which declares that "I (God) created ... humankind only that they might worship Me" (Al-Dhariyat 51.56). It connotes that God is the reason behind one's creation and that He alone could perfect his creations (Bahmani, et. al. 59-60). God is therefore "the greatest conceivable being" (Ali 894) and the true destination for a believer is towards God.

Weir's argument draws attention to *the ultimate purpose* behind the performance of religious actions. An acknowledgement of this purpose will thus bring forth a "substantive definition of freedom [which thematizes] the phenomenological dimension of participant experience. This particular experience of freedom is the experience of creativity, of play, of being in the present moment" (329). It is only then that the performance of norms can offer an experience away from the physical body of the performer and a better appreciation of the self, hence enhancing one's sense of the self. This outlines a spiritual experience that promises a closeness to God *before* the creation of an ideal self is able to take place. As God is believed to be at the very source of life and creation itself, this connection is a necessity and will therefore, erase one's needs to be indebted to other people (who are also God's creations).

This conceptualization is useful to understand the ways Sammar deals with emotional turmoil throughout the novel that hovers back and forth from loss to love, due to her attachment to the men in her life. These experiences go hand in hand with her spiritual journey, although at one stage in the novel, her desire for love overruns her commitment to religion. As a result, as I suggest in this paper, she manages to overcome heartache only after she refocuses her actions on God, thereby undergoing a complete transformation of the self, which begins with a renewed understanding of her faith.

### SAMMAR'S FLAWED RELIGIOSITY

*The Translator* offers a tale of a woman's survival and transformation after the death of a loved one. Dimitriu suggests that with her husband's untimely death, Sammar experiences the feeling of being "marginal and outside of the flow of things" (75) in the sense that she views her acute sense of loss as an isolating experience. She describes her young son's lack of understanding of his father's passing as "cruel and shocking" (Aboulela 8), although it is his young age (he was two when he died) which renders him unable to grasp the experience of loss. She then imposes a self-exile in Aberdeen, refusing to maintain regular contact with her family in Khartoum. This lonely exilic condition is a sign of emotional decapitation that restricts her from living a normal life. She becomes acutely aware of the cold weather and is "afraid of the rain, afraid of the fog and the snow... afraid of the wind" (3). She sees the other people around her who are living a normal life as "superhuman, giants who would not let the elements stand in their way" (3).

During this period, religious practices become the anchor in her life, as they provide her with a structure that helps regulate her life that has become "[i]ll and diseased with passivity" (Aboulela 14). The five prayers, for example, are "the only challenge, the last touch with normality, without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night" (14-15). I draw attention to Sammar's reference to her overwhelming sorrow as a disease, which suggests her awareness of the extremity of her actions, leading her to turn to the five daily prayers to provide structure in her life. This reads as an effort to improve her situation through religiosity, suggesting a shift from nostalgia to faith (Steiner 14). As Shirin Edwin argues, faith becomes the backbone of Sammar's efforts to improve her situation (73). The solution to her grief and loss, therefore, is within religion rather than outside of it.

As an extension of Edwin's argument, I would like to point out that there are many incidents in the novel which points to Sammar's imperfect religiosity as she struggles with her feelings and her faith. First, I draw attention to how Sammar views faith. She was brought up in a practicing Muslim family, and Islam had always been an important part of her life. This suggests the possibility that her actions are the automatic reactions of an individual who is used to this particular way of life, rather than a conscious commitment towards religion. Anecdotes of Sammar's childhood often reflect her early exposure to religious doctrines, where "there were the words of the Qur'an... [w]ords to learn by heart and recite in treacherous streets where rabid dogs barked too close... inside the terrifying dreams of childhood... to push away what was clinging and cruel" (Aboulela 91). Following this, it can then be argued that her commitment to the performance of prayers may simply be a result of habit.

Secondly, despite her staunch claim that her religious actions provide comfort as she comes to term with her husband's passing, she remains unable to move out of her mourning. I suggest that Sammar's religiosity works simply as an escape from sadness and grief instead of a true experience of faith, underlining a selfish purpose for personal salvation. There is no focus of her religious actions beyond that of her feelings. As Mahmood argues, religious activities do not stand on their own in its perfection of piety, but instead, have the capacity to encourage the development of the self in daily life—particularly in aspects of morality, in one's aim towards creating an ideal self (28-31). Sammar's refusal to move on with her life and to mend broken relationships with family members back home in Sudan problematizes her commitment to religion as she has failed to experience a positive improvement of herself and her life.

### THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN DESIRE AND FAITH

This failure concedes to Alison Weir's argument that focuses on the performance of norms as inhabiting connections to God. Sammar's religiosity, so far, lacks a complete focus on God. This is because she has an erroneous belief that life could only be complete when she is with the man that she loves. This can be seen in both of her relationships. For Sammar, her husband Tarig was not only her life partner, but was also a childhood companion and a friend. He was also her cousin, thus he had been an integral part of her life. She had known him since she was eight, and more so, she "could not reconcile herself to those first seven years of life without him" (Aboulela 4). Consider the following excerpt with regards to her upcoming trip home to Khartoum:

She had lived four years as if home had been taken away from her the same way Tarig had. To see home again. It was a chandelier on the ceiling of her life, circles of lights. To see again the streets where Tarig had ridden his bike, and she had walked every day after school with him and Hanan [his sister], walking towards the airport, with her back to where the sun would later set. To go to where everything happened, her aunt's house; laughter on their wedding, fire when she brought Tarig's body home (29).

Here, Sammar's nostalgia of Sudan, which she refers to as home, is mainly attached to the idea of Tarig. While this portrays her desires to relive those happy days, leading her to mainly remember the young version of him "like the elderly who remember the distant past more clearly than the events of the previous day" (22), it insinuates that she views Sudan as home only because of the memories she has of Tarig. Home, therefore, is a vague concept—an existential and psychological element rather than a physical and spatial one, or "a mythic place of desire" (Brah

192) that leads to the feeling of “homing desire.” It simply feeds on Sammar’s desire to belong, which is a feeling that is highly connected to the sense of familiarity and comfort that comes with it. For Sammar, then, the idea of home brings about emotional attachment and personal relationships—particularly with that of her deceased husband.

This need to belong then becomes the basis of her relationship with Rae. Readers are given hints of Sammar’s connection to Rae when she recalls the first time she visits Rae at his home. She explains that “[s]he had felt welcome that day, she had felt at home” (Aboulela 104). As she starts to develop a romantic feeling for Rae, she views their relationship as one that promises the same sense of belonging that came from the relationship with her husband. Her image of home has now constituted Rae. This emphasizes the fact that home for Sammar is an abstract idea. However, what becomes clear here is that it not only represents her desires for the men in her life, it also translates to a specific purpose, which is to settle and be married:

She would make [Rae] happy, she could do so much for him.

She wanted to cook for him different things, and then stand in the kitchen and think, I should change my clothes, wash, for her hair and clothes would be smelling of food. Mhairi [his daughter] could come and live with them, she would not need to go to boarding school anymore, and he would like that, seeing his daughter everyday, not having to drive to Edinburgh. (105-106)

For Sammar, then, home translates to being a wife as it provides her with a specific identity and a sense of place. Her concept of home, therefore, has an attachment to temporality where the future takes precedence over the past. Although Sammar remembers Tarig, the past are just memories that cannot be returned to, while the future is filled with hopefulness. Home is attached to “the impossibility and the necessity” (Ahmed 78) of a subject’s future and not the connection with the past, despite the fact that the future that is yearned may not become a reality.

With Sammar looking at Rae as her savior whose presence fulfils her sense of belonging, she becomes anxious over his religious beliefs. Earlier in the novel, Sammar has already wondered why he has not converted to Islam because “he knows so much about Islam” (Aboulela 20) and is relieved when he tells her that he is not an atheist (84-85). This relief, however, is short-lived when she recognizes that his views of Islam are merely a scholar’s perspective and do not reflect a personal attraction to the religion. This can be seen in their following conversation about faith:

“I view the Qur’an as a sacred text, as the word of God. It would be impossible in the kind of work I’m doing, in the issues I’m addressing for me to do otherwise but accept Muslims’ own vision of the Qur’an, what they say about it. To Fareed [his Muslim friend and colleague], though, this is tantamount to accepting Islam, and so he can’t understand it when I say I am not a Muslim.”

Sammar couldn’t understand it either. Hesitantly she said, “I think I agree with your friend.” (79)

Rae’s academic neutrality is suggestive of Sammar’s limited ability as a translator where she now realizes that knowledge and culture may be translatable, but faith is not (Wilson 387). Rae’s close association with the Muslims in his life has not created a need for him to become a Muslim himself, although he has shown his great respect for them. Here, the novel “works hard to achieve an interrogation of the feasibility of translating the human being-as-text between cultures [by retaining] its Islamic beliefs in the indivisibility of the faith” (Smyth 77). This suggests that faith is not a given, drawing on an important concept of guidance or *hidaya* in Islam. *Hidaya* derives from the root word *huda* in the Arabic language, which carries the meaning of faith that resides in a believer’s heart, mentioned several times in the Qur’an.<sup>3</sup> *Hidaya* is not a given, as religious guidance is not something which can be imposed on a person. However, one can encourage another person towards achieving *hidaya*, but in the end, it can only be achieved when God decrees for it. This is seen in the Qur’an: “It is true thou wilt not be able to guide everyone, whom thou lovest; but God guides those whom He will and He knows best those who receive guidance” (Al-Qasas 28.56). This doctrine goes back to the basic idea of Islam itself in which everything comes from God.

Sammar’s reaction to Rae’s lack of interest in becoming a Muslim further highlights her flawed religiosity. Her main concern is that they will be unable to marry if he retains his refusal to become a Muslim—not on his own well-being (Aboulela 79). As a result, she becomes increasingly frustrated with him, pushing him in a corner by demanding him to be a Muslim so that they could be married. Her persuasion fails as it is a forceful imposition of Islam. When he refuses, saying that he “[has] to be sure” and that converting simply for the sake of marriage is only “a token of gesture” (79) that does not constitute arriving at the faith, she vehemently replies:

“I wish I never trusted you... From the beginning, you should have looked at me and said, she is not for me...”

“I am not fooled by you. Just because you were kind to me and paid me attention. That’s all. But you would have always been second best... And I don’t want to live here for

the rest of my life with this stupid weather and stupid snow. Do you know what I wish for you? Do you know what I'm going to pray and curse you with? I'm going to pray that if it's not me then it's no one else and you can live the rest of your life alone and miserable. There really must be something wrong with you to have been divorced *twice*, not once, but twice." (Aboulela 116)

What is strikingly ironic about this situation is that here, the non-Muslim individual understands faith better than the one who is supposedly a pious Muslim. Sammar's hypocritical actions and words further proves her flawed religiosity as she now believes Rae would become a Muslim for her. She becomes blind to the fact that she herself sees Islam as a source of comfort and security, yet does not expect the same from him. Her actions outline a problem in her supposed conviction in God: She now wishes she could change his heart, which is an act that only God can control. She only wants Rae to become a Muslim for her own benefit, suggesting a complete lack of focus on God.

### THE TURN TOWARDS GOD

Although Sammar's many flaws reflect her as an imperfect Muslim, it also highlights the possibility for self-improvement, in which Sammar's weaknesses do not make her any less of a Muslim, but rather serve as a motivation for her to improve herself. Piety, therefore, is neither a given nor a static concept, rather it is dependent on who continuously strives towards betterment. Furthermore, religiosity is far from an element of the self that is achieved solely through religious actions and norms, rather these actions must include a clear aim that is geared towards achieving a strong connection to God. Chittick explains that the constant feeling of need is outlined in Islam as poverty, of which there are two kinds: the poverty of created needs and the poverty of attributes. The first refers to the needs and desires of all of God's creations, which is an ontological characteristic, while the second refers to the poverty of the heart, particularly in relation with God. The second poverty is more dangerous than the first as it leads to unbelief; it strips the heart "of knowledge, wisdom, sincerity, patience, contentment, surrender, and trust" (386). While Sammar's yearning for love is a common human need and desire which must be fulfilled, it can only materialize through knowledge of the Higher Power.

This can be explained by looking at Sammar's failure in her relationship with Rae. Her desire to be married and to become a wife is reflective of the first type of poverty; however, she does not realize that this can only be achieved when this need is focused towards God. She is in danger of suffering from the second type of poverty—leading to the failure of her romantic attachment to Rae. Sammar's words

of anger, directed towards Rae when he refuses to convert to Islam for her, has taken her away from the God that she believes in. The punishment that she gets for this selfishness is constant regret. She dreams about Rae ignoring her, suggesting her quiet shame. She admits that “she had tipped over, begged him, just say the *shahadah*, just say the words and it would be enough, [they] could get married then. It was not a story to be proud of” (Aboulela 151). She finally realizes that his refusal to convert to Islam is caused by her own weaknesses:

There were people who drew others to Islam. People with deep faith, the type who slept little at night, had an energy in them. They did it for no personal gain, no worldly reason. They did it for Allah’s sake. She had heard stories of people changing, prisoners in Brixton, a German diplomat, an American with ancestors from Greece. Someone influencing someone, with no ego involved. And she, when she spoke to Rae, wanting this and that, full of it; wanting to drive with him to Stirling, to cook for him, to be settled, to be someone’s wife.

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. If she could rise above that, if she would clean her intentions. He had been kind to her and she had given him nothing in return. She would do it now from far away without him ever knowing. It would be her secret. If it took ten months or ten years or twenty or more. (160)

This admission reflects two elements of Sammar’s attitude. First, this is a change from her egoistic behavior that is prevalent throughout the novel where her desire to be married no longer takes precedence. Second, this outlines a refocus on God. What this entails is Sammar’s final realization that only God has the power to move Rae to convert to Islam, and thus, the prayers for him to recognize Islam as the path for him to follow.

As a result of this epiphany, Sammar experiences a new sense of the self which is no longer tortured by grief or longing. She continues to dream of Rae, “[b]ut the more she prayed for him, the more those moments came until they were there all the time, not only thoughts, not only memories but an awareness that stayed” (Aboulela 165). This reflects a sense of calm that is bestowed on Sammar. Here, Sammar’s desire to belong is suddenly fulfilled. Unlike her initial thoughts that she can only be happy when she is married, the experience gives her a sense of satisfaction that has gone missing since Tarig’s death. I suggest that this calmness is a divine reward of “a life whose meaning is clear and unquestioned” (Weir 330). She admits her mistakes and by refocusing her desires to be on the figure of God and not outside of Him, she welcomes the news of Rae’s conversion to Islam, which gives her “the feeling of being lifted... [f]or she was being honoured now, she was being rewarded” (Aboulela 170-171).

Rae's conversion to the religion at the end of the novel is often read as a reconciliation of differences in Sammar's and Rae's belief systems, a resolution which brings together Islam and the West. For example, Tina Steiner suggests that it represents Sammar's success as a translator where she can now become a part of the West and he can now be a part of the tradition that she is in (23). Geoffrey Nash points out that although this conversion is a reward for Sammar, it also portrays an act of counter-acculturation where the conversion is treated as a political resistance against the West (30). Such readings retain the view of religion as a form of resistance by looking at the West as incompatible with religious consciousness. Thus, Sammar's religiosity can only be seen as incompatible with the West. However, as I have argued earlier, the novel must be understood as a journey towards realizing a relationship with God. Interestingly, Aboulela further emphasizes the connection between the performance of religious actions and daily life with Rae's personal reflection of his journey towards Islam at the end of the novel. He undergoes a similar process that Sammar had gone through. If, for her, the success of these actions results in overcoming her self-serving attitude, for Rae, it erases a sense of arrogance that he has carried all his life. He says that his biggest regret is "that [he] used to write things like 'Islam gives dignity to those who otherwise would not have any dignity in their lives,' as if [he] didn't need dignity [him]self" (180).

Taking these spiritual journeys into consideration, the ending of the novel can simply be read as an end result of the quest to establish and strengthen a relationship with God. Their impending marriage is a reward not only for Sammar (Nash 30), but also for Rae. Not only are they both able to fulfill their love for one another through marriage, but they are also able to achieve a sense of peace in their lives. This reward system is mentioned in the following Qur'anic verse: "Ask forgiveness of your Lord, and turn to Him (in repentance), He will send you the skies pouring abundant rain, and add strength to your strength" (Surah Hud 11:52). As both Sammar and Rae notice, when actions are focused on God, He does not leave them disappointed.

## CONCLUSION

*The Translator* successfully represents Aboulela's aim to present the spiritual aspects of the religion of Islam that have often been overlooked and misunderstood. She shares the idea that piety, solely in the form of adherence to religious actions, is inadequate and must come hand in hand with a moralistic transformation of the self. In other words, being pious does not automatically make one a good Muslim. What is important is for one to develop changes in the self that improve one's

behaviors in daily life, which can only be achieved if one creates and maintains a relationship with God. The novel emphasizes both the doctrinal and spiritual aspects of Islam. Religious actions may open a path towards God, but a believer can only achieve a connection to Him if these very actions are already carried out with Him in mind.

This puts forth the discussion on how religious actions can be in danger of simply being a perfunctory repetition, although they may still represent one's beliefs. As long as these actions are unthinking or automatic and are not accompanied with the purpose towards God, the believer will be deprived of the pleasure of having a relationship with God, of having a meaningful life that is not attached to worldly desires, and of an improved self. A believer must devote the physical and mental self to performing religious actions, if she is to develop her full potential. Despite Sammar's flaws that have marred her attitude and piety, she is eventually rewarded when she focuses on God through her actions. Therefore, a life that is completely devoted to God is a life that can never disappoint.

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## Notes

1. Aboulela has since then written three other novels and two collections of short stories, including *Elsewhere*, *Home*, which was published in June 2018.
2. Edwin's paper is also based on Saba Mahmood's (2005) conceptualization of norms and how they open a space for the enactment of agency. As I mentioned earlier, my arguments are also based on this framework although I divert from it in one important way. This will be discussed in the following section of the paper.
3. For example, refer to Al-Baqarah 2.272 and Al-Qasas 28.56 in the Holy Qur'an.

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