# Cross-cultural Romance: A Dialogic Evolution of Arab-Western Relations in Contemporary Arab Anglophone Women's Literature

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes.v25i2.722

Ayman Abu-Shomar and Wael Salam
*The University of Jordan, Aqaba Campus, Jordan*

Received: 15.3.2024 Accepted: 5.12.2024 Published Online: 9.12.2024

**Abstract:** The current global landscape is characterised by transnationalism and diaspora, concepts that wield tools such as dialogism, heteroglossia, and the unfinalisability of the self. In response to these transformative forces, a significant cohort of contemporary Arab Anglophone writers has embraced a dialogic paradigm. This article explores the artistic portrayal of Arab-Western relations through the literary works of two Arab Anglophone women writers, namely Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela. Living in the West and writing in English, these authors advocate, although unproblematically, a trans-cultural dialogue that seeks to harmonise shared cultural values across the divide between these two worlds. As migratory intermediaries and translators of culture, they adeptly negotiate the intricacies of intercultural interaction via cross-cultural romantic entanglements. Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogic paradigm, the article further posits that these narratives intentionally foreground dialogic perspectives while subverting the dichotomous tendencies inherent in monolithic nationalism. Ultimately, these authors promote diligent endeavours that critically respond to cultural representations in the context of Arab-Western relations.

**Keywords:** Anglophone Arab literature, Arab-Western relations, cross-cultural romance, cultural representation dialogism

## 1. Introduction

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, Arab Anglophone writers have emerged as influential voices in the Anglophone literary landscape, constructing a literary trend referred to as "*Borderland writings, diasporic narratives and immigrant/ hybrid writings*" (Sarnou 2014: 202, italics original). As these categorisations imply, it is possible to view this literary trend in light of global relations, considering the effects of migration and human mobility as well as colonisation and orientalist traditions. In the context of Arab Western relations, these "coming to voice" (Sarnou 2016: 66) writers offer nuanced representations that reject both simplistic narratives of assimilation as well as the clash of civilisations postulations (Abu-Shomar 2019: 1; Salam and Abualadas 2020: 52). Instead, as Abu-Shomar argues, they adopt a third, critical narrative voice that undermines cultural divides while promoting empathetic understanding of Arab identities and experiences. Writing in English and through a conscious manner, these writers reach a global audience providing authentic accounts of Arab lives that subvert reductionist narratives and contest stereotypes (Awad 2011: 5). In doing so, they move away from traditional tropes of mistrust, mutual antagonism, and the clash of civilisations legacies into postulating nuanced representations and perspectives on Arab culture, history, and identity (Awad 2011: 34).

Ahdaf Soueif and Lielah Aboulela exemplify this literary trend whose immense oeuvres not only bring Arab visibility in the West, but also articulate an alternative vision of an "intercultural synthesis" that subverts antithetical conflicts between the Arab and Western worlds (Saleh, Saleh and Al-Shboul 2024: 55). Soueif's work, as Hassan (2014: 89) observes, contests the dichotomous clichés associated with the Occident and the Orient tropes through co-constructing human experiences that transcend cultural boundaries. In her novel *The Map of Love*, Soueif intertwines the histories of Egypt and Britain, highlighting the interconnectedness of their pasts and the potential for redeeming the distorted image of the Arabs in the West (Mirsky 1999: np). With an emphasis on the nuances that surround Arab women, Lielah Aboulela delves into intricate issues such as identity, multi-cultural relationships, the East-West divide, migration, and Islamic spirituality. However, her novel *The Translator* offers dense portrayal of how multiple cultures and religions are interconnected while emphasising the fluidity of cultural identity (Campbell 2019). Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of carnival, Ben Amara (2024: 268) explores the ways in which Aboulela's work destabilises the totalising myths of order and uniformity while emphasising her advocation of carnivalesque chaos. She, according to Ben Amara, favours borders and peripheries to challenge prevailing ideologies while attesting the fluidity and dynamic nature of space. This brief review demonstrates that, in spite of the writers' ongoing interest in cultural representation, comparatively little research has been done distinctly and openly on the representation of the Arab-Western relationship in these two works. Additionally, utilising cross-cultural romance, both texts have the potential to provide a critical re-signification of orientalist assumptions associated

with estrangement narratives of "us" and "them". Aiming to unsettle antagonistic tensions between the Arab and Western worlds, they explore new common grounds (or the Mezzaterra) related to the rich tapestry of Arab culture and history while fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

Since this literary trend, exemplified by these two texts, thrives in areas where cultures converge, it serves as a catalyst for the development of a theoretical milieu that allows for the examination of different viewpoints regarding the understanding of the Arab-Western relationship. This article examines how this relationship is depicted in these texts as well as the critical discourse these narratives have generated. The entire spectrum of unconsidered viewpoints present in this Arab Anglophone literary trend have been appropriated by dichotomous cultural narratives (Hassan 2014). By contrast, drawing on the dialogic paradigm, we argue that a significant part of these narratives is polyphonic in nature while staging the complexity and heterogeneity of cultural representations. This important aspect of Arab Anglophone poetics is what warrants of the present article: How do those writers dialogically respond to many of clichés characterising the tensions in the Arab-Western relationship?

## 2. Mezzaterra: Dialogues across borderlands

The relevance of fictional representations in understanding and performing world's relationships is unsurpassable. Through literary sphere, a cultural group not only perceives its identity and values, but also offers critical lenses to question itself in relation to the other (Sellman 2018: 751). Literature, as Sellman argues, reflects the changing realities of cultural groups, including relationships between these groups. In this sense, literature (the novel, in particular) and reality are often intertwined through which writers represent events of their time, not to reflect the existing reality, but rather their thoughts regarding this reality. As Said (1994: 42-3) argues, "Each novelist articulates a consciousness of his time that he shares with the group of historical circumstances (class, period, perspectives) make him a part". The personal narratives cannot be underestimated since, according to Bakhtin (2010: 84), it is not private life that is subjected to and interpreted in light of social and political events, but rather the other way around; social and political events gain meaning in the novel thanks to their connection with private life.

However, the question of the interplay between representation and reality entails a complex truth: "While human events are not in themselves art, fiction, unlike double acrostics, is clearly an art that is somehow made of human events" (Bakhtin 2010: 124). The fact that the current literary movement is presumed to have a political agenda does not obliterate its dialogic tendency. Bakhtin (2013: xvii) insists that critics who perceive the literary work as a pure fictional form, become unconsciously intrigued in abstracting human conditions and values. In Aboulela's (1999) *The Translator,* Rae's conversion to Islam turns the book as an

"ideologically religious", as Phillips (2012: 67) argues. Resting on an ultimate faith of objectivity, such a critical reception, according to Bakhtin (2013: xix), ends up with a kind of "point-of-voyeurism" through which a literary work is emptied of its unity and the aims it aspires to achieve. Instead, Bakhtin believes that since "authors found themselves addressing audiences who shared some values and did not share others, they had to find effective ways to embody values in fiction and drama, values that would make the work" (p. xviii). While total objectivity is unachievable, dialogic relationships imply a readiness to negotiate each group's political positions, worldviews, and cultural values. Notwithstanding this argument, the building blocks of representing Arabs-Western relationship, as Gani (2019) argues, rest on realistic framework of the socio-political events taking place in the two worlds. Premised on factual realities such as human mobility, global connectivity, and border crossing, this literary movement has shifted away from colonial and postcolonial dispute to experiment with new aesthetics of representation at the boundaries of cultures (Sarnou 2016).

Therefore, the fact that Arab Anglophone literary movement thrives in such borderlands qualifies it to be considered within the conceptual frameworks of Soueif's (2010) Mezzaterra and Bakhtin's (2010; 2013) dialogism. Bakhtin (2010: 49) believes that dialogue exists on the boundaries separating people, not as a meeting between disparate entities that are within the boundaries but rather on the boundaries themselves. Likewise, Soueif (2010: 90) postulates Mezzaterra (or a meeting point) as a dynamic middle territory between cultures, arguing that cultures constantly reflect on each other. Mezzaterra is the very terrain where opposing consciousnesses and tensions can dialogically interact: "An area of overlap, where one culture shaded into the other, where echoes and reflections added depth and perspective, where differences were interesting rather than threatening, because they were foregrounded against a backdrop of affinities" (Soueif 2010: 93-4). Mezzaterra is more than a simple acceptance of diversity (e.g., multiculturalism), but rather a fluid territory that puts cultures in dialogues: "It is both radical and nurturing, deeply committed to the concept of solidarity and lived experiences as something that must be shared, as well as critiqued, in order for it to be meaningful" (Soueif 2010: 83). In dialogic relationships, individuals re-create the images of specific persons (or groups) who voice their ideas in specific texts and contexts. Bakhtin (2010: 289) argues that dialogism adopts "ultimately shared standards of truth," maintained through a "regulatory principle of exchange with others" (Bakhtin 2010: 349). Unlike their predecessors who centre on binary oppositions, the contemporary generation of Arab Anglophone writers advocates transformative borderlands narratives that favours dialogism and cross-cultural understanding (Abu-Shomar 2022).

Furthermore, these writers' existential reality as border crossers converges with a representational tendency of cross-cultural romance (Davis 2007; Alghamdi 2014). Romance in culture is transcendental in the sense that it entails a

transformative quality for the couple involved in the relation. They construct self-meanings beyond the social group norms they belong to, exhibiting readiness to embrace self-sacrifice and an idealisation of the other (De Munck et al.: 130). While cross-cultural romance in fiction is quite often political lending itself to national or imperialist beliefs, Soueif's *Map of love* evades such political failings, as Davis (2007) argues. Whereas national romance is presumed to unify a nation through a fantasy of reconciliation between individuals belonging to homogenous backgrounds, colonial romance is well suited to the xenophobic nationalism of the colonial project to secure the empires' imagined domination. Colonial romance, according to Davis (2007: 7), emerges from the desire of exploration (be it imaginative or actual) that is depicted as an exclusively masculine heroic act in "a moment of penetration into a suggestively feminised locale". Soueif, as Davis (2007: 9) argues, deftly connects romance with politics, allowing her to explore the global political conditions where neither nationalist rhetoric nor colonialist fantasy are approved. On the other hand, Alghamdi (2014) argues that Aboulela's *The Translator* relocates the conventions of cross-cultural romance by associating her female protagonist so intimately with the very tropes that compose the colonialist narrative and patriarchal romance to "enable her subject move beyond resistance into a creative state that encourages new alliances and transcendent understanding, the achievement is particularly noteworthy" (p. 23). Therefore, Alghamdi adds, rather than celebrating the clash or assimilative narratives, the "two poles, the Western and Eastern consciousness, reach gently, and ultimately with fulfilment, for one another" (p. 33). Instead of harnessing the affective force of romance story to justify the ends of empire or to suture national inequalities, the writers at hand utilise new dialogic vocabulary to yoke the romance's emotional power to a critique of the exclusionary violence of both.

## 3. *The Map of Love*: An occident and orient mezzaterra

The Egyptian British writer Ahdaf Soueif's novels and short stories have carved out an important space on the stage of Arab Anglophone literature. She attends to the recent transformations, featuring the relationship between the East and West by rerouting a trajectory marked by the departure from a-taken-for-granted cultural values towards a redefined dialogic transnationalism (Sarnou 2016: 72). She postulates the construction of diasporic consciousness at every crossroad of multiple generations and divergent worldviews (Awad 2011: 114). For her, dialogic narratives are much more sophisticated than reductionist methods premised on the idea that cultures have rigid boundaries that can be negotiated. Instead, as Hamdar (2012: 20) observes, Soueif's work is intrinsically linked with subjectively experienced spaces informed by mobility, interconnectivity, and the need for interaction.

In *The Map of Love*, Soueif (1999) employs the genre of cross-cultural romance as an attempt to alter the historical record of the Egyptian-British relationship by giving a double-edged criticism to the tropes connected with national and colonial romance (Davis 2007). Soueif's romance is multi-layered

where three generations of two Egyptian and British families are intrigued in an inescapable but stimulating web of history. This romance is structured around two temporal strands: the first concerns the transcultural romance between the British lady Anna Winterbourne and the Egyptian political activist Sharif Basha around the beginning of the 20th century; the second concerns their grandchildren, the journalist Isabel Parkman and the political activist, Omar al-Gamrawi in the late 1990s. Through these two romances, Soueif introduces a web of narratives of the past and present woven together by a discovery of Anna's old trunk that contains letters, diaries, and trinkets. Although the components of the trunk chronicle Anna's life with Sharif, they make up for a historical record of the relationship between Britain and Egypt. At the close of the 20th century, Isabel, Anna's great-grand daughter, discovers the trunk and brings it to Egypt. Isabel, Amal, (Omar's sister) and Omar piece together the letters and diaries to restructure their family tree, and by extension, to re-narrate the history of Egyptian-British relations. While the trunk acts as a map to guide the grandchildren in tracing their shared lineage, it inevitably sheds light on the alloyed history of Egypt and Britain. Thus, the personal narratives revealed by the discovery of the trunk and the trajectory it aids bring up the disparate temporalities of Britain and Egypt through which the relationship could be re-narrated.

The narrative moves back and forth in time and in space resulting in effecting polyphonic voices of its characters. Soueif utilises this technique to decentralise the forces of colonial and national representation of the relationship between the two countries. Ostensibly, she pays similar attention to all her characters regardless of their cultural background. She creates interchangeable worldviews not in a comparable manner and not who is better than the other, but rather at once a distillation and an enrichment of one another. The first romance that connects Anna and Sharif yields hybridised individuals; in the words of Anna, Sharif is "not an Arab […] not properly" (Soueif 1999: 145). Although portrayed as a political activist, Sharif is of Turkish descent, making him a challenge to dogmatic nationalism. He travels many times to Europe, yet he is not a mimic to the coloniser's ethos, but a thoughtful intellectual and defiant anti-colonialist. In one of his letters found in Anna's trunk, he admits that he has endorsed many "elements that most suited [his …] traditions and aspirations" since "that is the legitimate commerce of humanity" (p. 484). Such cultural exchange highlights Soueif's awareness of the inevitability of creolisation of contemporary societies. Through Sharif's call for "unity of conscience", Soueif establishes Mezzaterra as cosmopolitan shared ground between Eastern and Western cultures. At the end of his essay, Sharif writes:

> Our only hope now – and it is a small one – lies in a unity of conscience between the people of the world whom this phrase itself would carry any meaning. It is difficult to see the means by which such a unity can be affected. But it is in its support that these words are written (p. 481-482).

Likewise, Anna is depicted as an individual whose worldviews are guided by ardent ethical judgments. Anna's role functions as a disconnection between romance relationship and violence as well as a humanist voice who prioritises the human values over political ones. Prior to coming to Egypt, she was married to a colonel in the British imperial army. Interestingly, this former experience has equipped her with a reversal perspective through which she critically reflects on her location as a woman identified with a colonial power. During this phase of her life, she documents the atrocities committed by the imperial army in Sudan in several blogs and letters in her journal. She also affiliates with those anti-imperialist voices in Britain, including her first husband's father-in-law who detaches himself from the politics of his country. For example, she contests the fallacy of the colonial dictum, "civilising mission" (p. 31). Questioning this colonial discourse, she writes in the same entry: "I am afraid we are in the grip of something evil" (p. 31). Upon her former husband's return from Sudan, Anna describes his psychological deterioration as a result of participating in the killing of 11,000 Dervishes. After her husband's death, she becomes dissenter to the British colonialism by engaging with the British society in Egypt. She also objects to converting Muslims to Christianity since she attests that Muslims believe in God. Still, Anna's romance relation and marriage to Sharif mark a turning point in her relationship with the Egyptian society. In addition to remaining an anti-imperialist, she also challenges the misrepresentation of Egyptians as "an uncivilised people" (p. 38). In another letter she sends back to London, Anna explains that a large sector of the educated Egyptian elites supports secular education alongside preserving their cultural heritage.

Anna and Sharif both establish their own Mezzaterra as an intersecting space between the two cultures. Given their linguistic and cultural differences, they display a startling lack of interpersonal conflict revealing how both inhabit such a space. For them, experiencing the boundary means that their cultures are less monolithic than was originally perceived, but rather have potentials to exchange. They demonstrate astonishing understanding of their differences. Anna remarks, "Our ways are different. Let us be patient with one another" (p. 353). When Anna wonders why Sharif did not attempt to consummate his love to her before marriage, he explains that this is a clue of ethics of Egyptian hospitality: "It took every atom of strength that I had not to pull you into my arms" (p. 360). Since dialogue eliminates the unjustified fear of the unknown, it undermines the alienating doctrines associated with Otherness. Sharif, for example, teases Anna for adopting the Westerners' presumed perception of the patriarchal image of Arab males: "Weren't you afraid of me? The wicked Pasha who would lock you up in his harem and do terrible things to you?" She simply replies, "What terrible things?" (p. 153). She not only rejects the colonialist stereotypes perpetuated by British expatriates in Egypt, but also exhibits exceptional courage when she is abducted by Sharif's nephews. While Anna's smooth integration in the Egyptian society is arguably questionable (e.g., Mirsky 1999), we believe that Anna is prepared for such a role

since, in addition to being an independent, Victorian noblewoman, she has passed through a transcultural experience through her former marriage.

An extension of remapping the evolutionary stages of the Egyptian-Western relationship, Soueif brings the narrative to the present time through the third-generation characters. Almost a century later, another romance is developed between Isabel, Anna's great granddaughter, and Omar, a mixed Egyptian and Palestinian descent. Like their ancestors, the protagonists of this romance are depicted as hybrid individuals even prior to their relationship. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Soueif employs this present romance to pursue and expand her vision of Arab-Western relationship, not only between Egypt and Britain, but also between Palestine and America. In terms of the present romance however, Soueif reemphasises Mezzaterra as a hegemonic-free space where individuals of disparate cultures can meet without any attempt from each to erase the other. Additionally, rather than keeping this space imaginative, Soueif shifts the setting of the romance to New York City where Isabel and Omar commence their family life having a child named Sharif.

Avoiding monolithic, linear storytelling, Soueif constantly moves back and forth between the past and the present creating a crisscross movement that hybridises, not only the past and the present, but also creates interconnections between Egypt and Britain. As the romance develops in the present, the characters from both sides exhibit greater sense of critical consciousness towards their relationships. In fact, the women who fall in love with politically engaged men in both romances end up playing a role in politics that departs their own national parties. Davis (2007: 12) argues that as the contemporary characters continue to "unearth the historical narratives, it becomes clear that there are significant parallels – personal and political – between this earlier moment and their own". Through such a prolific expansion of romance, Soueif reaches out the more complications of the relationship between Arab and Western worlds, including issues of misrepresentation, the Palestine question, religious fundamentalism, and Arab women, among others. For example, Isabel wonders about a young Arab student with a beard if he is an Islamic fundamentalist who, according to her, could be potentially connected to terrorism. Soueif challenges such misconceptions through a dialogic exchange between Isabel and Omar:

> "'What fundamentalist?' He [Omar] asked.
> 'I don't know. [… Isabel]
> 'You should get your fundamentalists sorted –'
> 'But is it true?'
> 'Do I look like a fundamentalist? Act like a fundamentalist?'
> 'No. But that is what they say about you'" (Soueif 1999: 178).

Brainwashed by Western media, Isabel embraces this stereotype since she tells Omar she used to see this on TV. In her challenge to such hegemonic misrepresentations, Soueif provides multiple narratives that maximise connection between Arabs and Westerners rather than focus on the dysfunctionality of a polarising discourse.

Those narratives include friendships, sisterhood and multilingualism, aiming not only to interlink characters, situations and discourses, but also to signify the novel's dialogic appeal. Since Omar introduces his wife Isabel to his sister Amal, the two women become close friends, having a significant role in promoting the relationships. As they read through Anna's journals, the two women creatively fill in the blanks by drawing parallels between Britain and Egypt, a recurring process that emerges as the central theme of the narrative. Actually, friendship between female individuals is established earlier as Anna and Layla, Sharif's sister, were also close friends. This budding friendship during the first romantic relationship gives rise to women's solidarity, which is essential for advancing cross-cultural communication. Layla provides Anna with access to the Egyptian hidden culture: "I found the company and conversation most pleasing and quite contrary to the prevailing view of the life of the harem being one of indolence and torpor" (p. 236-237). Through French, the only shared language between the two women, they discuss gender equality, education for girls, and the lifting of the veil. On one occasion, Anna is excited when she wears the veil: "While I was wearing it, I could look wherever I wanted, and nobody could look back at me" (p. 195). While the West often view Muslim women's veil as a sign of oppression, Anna feels it a liberating garment. She writes:

> The oddest thing of all was that I suddenly saw them as bright, exotic creatures, walking in a kind of magical space, oblivious to all around them, at ease, chattering to each other as though they were out for a stroll in the park, while the people, pushed aside, watched and waited for them to pass (p. 194-195).

In fact, three strands of women's friendship are recognised in the narrative with reference to time frame: in the past (Anna and Layla), in the present (Isabel and Ama), and in both (Amal's imagined friendship with Anna). Amal wonders: "Who else has read this journal? And when they read it, did they too feel that it spoke to them? For the sense of Anna speaking to me – writing it down for me – is so powerful that I find myself speaking to her in my head" (p. 306). Amal's evocations underscore a dialogic moment in the narrative since multi-voices could be heard simultaneously: Amal's voice, Anna's voice, and the people Anna writes about. Interestingly, Soueif also appeals to the voice of the readers to challenge any potential to her characters' monologic voice.

Through the contemporary friendship between Amal and Isabel, Soueif reconstructs the old stories through fresh eyes. Isabel's plan to study Egypt reveals how history needs to be reconstructed now and then since according to her, "It's

like going back to the beginning. Six thousand years of recorded history" (p. 19). Amal ponders, "That is the beauty of the past; there it lies on the table: journals, pictures, a candle-glass, a few books of history. You leave it and come back to it and it waits for you – unchanged" (p. 243). Rather than losing herself in the past, Amal is more concerned about translating this past to the present since her primary identification with Anna translates the latter's personal experience across both cultures and times. Isabel also confirms Amal's translation attempts: "If people can write to each other across space, why they cannot write across time too?" (p. 468). At a time when the Arab-Western relationship experiences deep mistrust, Amal perceives Anna as a role model for intermediating the East and the West.

Indeed, *The Map of Love* makes a statement about the potential for transformation and exploration of the various aspects of blossoming cross-cultural interactions through the interconnection of cultures in form and content. In addition to serving as a plot device that connects characters, situations, and discourses, Anna's diaries (trunk) along with the narratives it uncovers and the reactions it elicits serve as a signifier of the novel's salient cross-cultural dialogic appeal. At the core of the novel is the oneness of humanity across time and culture that prioritises commonalties between cultures. Symbolically, Anna's trunk very much evolves into a borderland mezzaterra, "an area of overlap, where one culture shaded into the other, where echoes and reflections added depth and perspective, where differences were interesting rather than threatening, because they were foregrounded against a backdrop of affinities" (Soueif 2010: 7-8). As such, Soueif's creative romances and friendships offer bifocal lenses that reinterpret the history of Arab and Western relations. The various roles that the characters play while narrating history, along with their multilingual and multicultural upbringings, allow Soueif's project to accomplish its intended message, namely the creation of Mezzaterra where the East and West can dialogically meet. This concludes in the same way as that of Massad (1999: 76) claiming that "*The Map of Love* ushers in moments of intercultural understanding and dialogue". Soueif's narratives, however, sets a compelling example of how a critical and transformational two-way relation between the Arab and the West could be realised. Through reversing the traditional roles of men and women, she brings about a critical feminine voice that subverts the patriarchal image of males in both sides. While the Egyptian men in these two romances appropriate Western traits from their partners, the women in the novel seem to gain more agency through romantic relations towards negotiating cultural differences.

### 4. *The Translator*: The unfinalisable personhood

Like Soueif, Leila Aboulela's polyphonic novel *The Translator* (1999) fosters cross-cultural romance to infuse a plurality of consciousnesses of her characters each with its own world. The novel, however, depicts distinct and unrestful perspectives of transcultural romance taking place between Sammar, a young Sudanese widow, and Rae, a Scottish academic who has been divorced twice. Sammar works as a translator of Arabic for Rae, a specialist in Middle Eastern

politics at the University of Aberdeen. Unlike Soueif, Aboulela provides a strand of romance entailing major setbacks as Sammar has to balance religious loyalties with her love for Rae. Yet Aboulela provides a nuanced exploration of the meaning of "unfinalisability" (Bakhtin 2013) of her characters in the sense that they can never be externally defined or fully enclosed by others' objectivation. They are also unconstrained by any "conceptual frameworks that enclose them in an alien web of definition and causation, robbing them of freedom and responsibility" (Clark and Holquist 1984: 61-62). Her protagonists are, on the other hand, constantly malleable and never fully revealed, despite effectively having conflicting consciousnesses (Bakhtin 2013: 166). Given its transcultural nature, it is plausible to explore this romance within the context of the relationship between the Arab and Western worlds on a larger global scale, as well as through the challenges the lovers face along the way.

Since Aboulela's romance revolves around the protagonists' transformative consciousness, it is explored through a retrospective narrative style that delves into their pasts. The novel opens with Sammar's yearnings to overcome the shadows of her past:

> When she boiled chicken, forth rose to the surface of the water and she removed it with a spoon. Inside Sammar there was forth like that, forth that could rise if she started to speak. Then he would see it and maybe go away, when what she wanted was for him to remove it so that she could be clear (Aboulela 1999: 23).

To heal her estrangement, Sammar's sense of subservience necessitates a self-recovery, a process requiring intersubjective revisions that pass through intra-subjective relations. Both lovers work buoyantly for this objective. On his part, Rae battles to deconstruct his seemingly self-evident personality by challenging Sammar's assumptions of herself and those of Rae. Through extended telephone calls, both adopt multi-toned voice by means of sharing their afflictions while attesting altruism towards one another: "What was real that she had been given permission to think and talk, and he would not be surprised by anything she said. As if he had given her a promise, never to be taken back" (65). Since unpacking the intersubjective self is necessary for transforming consciousness, both reconfigure the landscape between them to approach one another. Rather than adhering to altruistic sacrificing positions, both create metamorphic meanings that transcend across diverse subjects working towards similar intentions.

Despite being a devout Muslim woman, Sammar's worldviews as well as emotions exemplify a nuanced example of an unfinalisabile individual whose personality is progressive. Emotions are nonessentialist and constructed since they are implicated in the operation of historically changing systems of social hierarchy (Zannoun 2019: 2). Aboulela's depiction of cross-cultural romance entails such reality since Sammar's emotions become part of her unfinalisabile self that is subject to fluid nonessentialist construction. In doing so, Aboulela critiques both

the patriarchal system of Arab societies as well as the Western hegemonic assumptions of difference linked to the "Third World", particularly archetypal views of Islam as inherently oppressive to women. Within such contesting context, Sammar's sense of place and subjectivity are grounded in emotions towards Rae, producing a dialogic exchange between herself and her host society. Early in the novel, she perceives Aberdeen as having a hostile weather that might ruin her professional and emotional commitment to Rae. In the zenith of her relationship with Rae, those feelings are transformed to the level that she, for example, senses the weather of Aberdeen as "warm" and "the sky is cloudless with too many stars" (21). Furthermore, since her relationship with Rea appears to be failing, and she leaves for Sudan, her sense of nostalgia is reversed, as if her home and the host land were trading places. Therefore, rather than being ostracised or alienated by the "foreign" place, it is Sammar's very emotions that give meanings to place. As Ben Amara (2014: 270-271) argues, Aboulela depicts places, particularly the metropolitan city, as perpetually drawn and re-drawn into the boundaries where "these boundaries are constantly traversed by subversive connections (religious, cultural or otherwise) that undercut the discourse of national cohesion". Thus, Aboulela undermines the axioms of home versus host land drawing on Sammar's unfinalisabile self as captured by her fluctuating emotions.

Furthermore, being surrounded by self-assertive people who attempt to impose their opinions on her, Sammar resists being defined or finalised by such external forces. Yasmin, Sammar's colleague, and a secretary in Rae's office, is a striking example of immigrants who adhere to monolithic assumptions about her host community. Although she was born, raised and spent her entire life in Britain, she cannot tolerate Western values: "We are not like them" (p. 16). She also has a habit of making general statements, always starting with "we" as a reference to the Globa South: "We have close family ties, not like them […]. Our children are dying of hunger while the rich count their calories" (p. 17). She expresses her extreme dislike to her host community: "I loath all this fuss about the Royals" and "I loath this shitty British weather" (p. 17). "Loath" is another word, betraying Yasmin's attitude towards the West. On another occasion, she draws a clear line between the East and the West in terms of cultural and moral values.: "Yes, we prize virginity […] It's hard to believe that a British judge and jury could understand that, let alone sympathise" (27).

Yasmin's avowal of such narrow perspective plays a significant role in erecting a cultural barrier that hinders Sammar's and Rae's relationship. She defines Sammar according to her own dogmatic interpretation of marriage in Islam: "You are the last person in the world I expect this from. What do you imagine you're doing?" "Are you going to marry someone who's not a Muslim?" (p. 129). When Sammar disregards her opinions, Yasmin vehemently declares her disbelief in transcultural marriage: "If I were you, I'd avoid him like the plague till then. Go home and maybe you'll meet someone normal, someone Sudanese like yourself. Mixed couples just don't look right, they irritate everyone" (p. 153). On the basis

of these opinions, it is interesting to note that some detractors accuse Aboulela of violating the moral standards of "Arab culture". Abulmaaty (2016: 37), for example, believes that such a transcultural romance represents a stigma against Muslim women who choose to wed Westerners: "It is very strange and unjustified to leave her own son, the most precious and valuable passion in the world, and return to Aberdeen where her focus became the hospital room". Such voices actually betray their own ideologies because they miss the fact that Aboulela locates Sammar in the middle of her ambitions to have a family with Rae, including his daughter and her son, and the rigid restrictions on such a relationship.

Unlike Yasmin, Sammar expresses her gratitude for her host community and, at times, expresses admiration for it. Upon the death of her husband, she appreciates the support and condolences she receives from her British neighbours:

> People helped her, took over. Strangers, women whom she kept calling by wrong names, filled the flat, cooked for her […] She went between them thanking them, humbled by the awareness that they were not doing this for her or for Tarig, but only because they believed it was the right thing to do" (Aboulela: 12).

Through her final remark, Sammar understands and confirms the women's behaviour as being humanistic, something that people do regardless of their ethnicity or cultural background. On other instances, she shows a greater degree of empathy for the culture of her new home than she does for her native Sudan. She likes Rae's cat's friendly behaviour while brushing its fur against her knees. Back in Sudan, she had a bad experience with a vicious cat that broke into her kitchen and destroyed the cabinets. Sammar, however, expands on the incident by contrasting how people in Sudan and Britain treat cats. While cats in Britain are all friendly, in Sudan, due to human behaviour toward them, cats have evolved into "savage" creatures: "They were savage cats, their ribs visible against matted, dirty fur. Some had a black hole instead of an eye, some had stumpy legs, amputated tails" (p. 20). On another occasion, she evokes:

> An old man in Edinburgh was allowing his daughter's ex-husband under his roof. This must be civilised behaviour, an 'amicable divorce'. Where she come, from the divorced spouse was one who 'turned out to be a son of a dog' or 'she turned out to be mad' and were treated as such No one 'stayed friends', no one stayed on talking terms (p. 63).

Although referring to as "unnecessary details" (Phillips 2012: 69), such occurrences show Aboulela's attention to the minute details, gaps, and discontinuities that give the narrative its realistic depiction of people's day-to-day experiences. In the contexts of Arab-Western relation, they however reveal a self-reflective autonomy that is not grounded in substantive cultural assumptions, but in close observations that become an indication of individual's unfinalisabile self-thematization. As the narrative unfolds, Sammar gradually exhibits her human capacity and responsibility towards the other.

Since terrorism is the main issue dividing Arab-Western relations today, Aboulela strikes a balance while addressing the different facets of this problem. In fact, the former US President George W. Bush's declaration of war against terrorism came not long after the book's publication. Although charged as an author of "religious agenda" (Phillips 2012: 66), Aboulela introduces nuanced articulations for a critical understanding of this problem. She reiterates the heteronormative voice and diverse subject positions of her characters, highlighting the fact that politics is more closely related to the issue than personal worldviews. Prior to his higher academic study of politics, Rae works in a craft shop in Morrocco owned by a native Moroccan and his French wife. The shop served as a kind of unofficial forum for visitors from around the globe, in addition to purchasing souvenirs, they discuss current political issues: "He admired their knowledge manners, their easy coming and going". "Surrounded by calligraphy, arabesque, what was intricately woven, what was embroidered on cloth, Rae learnt what he had not learnt in university nor debating society he had been so active in" (Aboulela: 83). When he was young, Rae has the opportunity to gain firsthand knowledge of Arab culture: "He visited the cafes, played dominos, smoked the hubble-bubble pipe. He went into the mosques, learnt to take his shoes off, sit cross-legged on the floor" (p. 84). Perceiving his employers to be "the link with the international community" (p. 84), Rae has accumulated significant knowledge about Arab-Western conflicts, including Jamal Abdul-Nasser's closing of Straits of Tiran, the Six-Day War, the occupation of the Sinai Desert and the West Bank. In his opinion, the shop's "international community" is a more trustworthy source of knowledge than those provided by media and politicians: "When the pilots were away, the flat was full of Rae's thoughts and crackling of the BBC World Service" (p. 89).

Very much like Sammar, Rae resists the adamant nationalist voices in his part. However, for an academic and a "specialist in the world's politics", his case is more precarious (p. 34), and Yasmin claims that revealing any sympathy for Arab issues would be tantamount to "political suicide" (p. 40). In fact, his first marriage falls apart because he and his wife, who is a senior official in the UN, cannot agree on political matters: "When you are climbing the WHO's ladder of success, the last thing you need is a husband skulking around, criticising the UN, pointing out the hypocrisy of their policies" (p. 47). In one of his books entitled *The Illusion of an Islamic Threat,* Rae objects the metanarratives that locate the Arabs as a radical enemy of the West by offering an informed and first hand understanding of the turbulent situation in the Middle East. In the jacket blurb of the book, Sammar reads: "*Isles is sets out to prove that the threat of an Islamic take-over of the Middle-East is exaggerated … his arguments are bold, his insights provocative …* - *The Scotsman*" (p. 18, italics and ellipsis are original).

Through dialogism, Aboulela discloses the inner side of her protagonists who seek meaningful existence. At an epistemic level, intersubjectivity establishes the truth of propositions for all those involved in dialogic relations (Bakhtin 2013).

When Sammar leaves to Sudan, Rae speaks on her behalf illuminating her inner voice of repulsion against such a decision:

> 'But if you go home,' Rae said, 'you would find it hard to come back and I would have no translator any more'. She learnt, then, the meaning of his kindness. – That he knew she was heavy with other loyalties, full to the brim with distant places, voices in a language that was not his own (p. 182).

Merging intersubjective and cultural viewpoints, Sammar and Rae become equipped with the tools to understand one another's perspectives. When Rae struggles to understand familial traditions in Sudan, Sammar seems to eliminate the barriers that reinforce cultural divides: "She went on, wondering which part of the narrative to soften, to omit. How much of the truth could she take without a look of surprise crossing his eyes? She had never said anything that surprised him before, and she wanted it always to be like that" (p. 9). On his part, Rae "seemed to understand, not in a modern deliberately non-judgmental way but as if he was about to say, 'this has happened to me too'" (p. 9). Besides having a happy outcome, Aboulela's transcultural romance articulates the protagonists' will of embracing autonomous decisions. Rather than eclipsing certain cultural features, there always exist rediscoveries of new forms of cultural meanings amid the setbacks of their relationship.

Furthermore, Aboulela creatively reworks cultural meanings by coupling transcultural romance with translation. She locates meaning between cultural and linguistic gaps that emerge from dialogic interactions. For instance, Sammar becomes excited when translating the first text to Rae perceiving the outcome as "a baby [who] walk[s] for the first time" (p. 15). In fact, it is through translation that the transcultural romance between the two is resolved. Rejecting less plausible assumptions about cultures, Rae and Sammar perceive transcultural meanings, including their own romance, as a process constantly reshaping itself. Rae cautions Sammar that in his society, certain expressions may have different interpretations while discussing how accurately some Hadith words can be translated. In their extended discussions they appropriate such expressions to convey their intended meanings to Western audience while acknowledging that some aspects of culture and religion cannot be accurately translated.

More interestingly, Aboulela challenges the hegemony of languages and cultures by exploring the true power of translation. As Alghamdi (2014: 23) affirms, Aboulela employs translation as "the building of a bridge between cultures and people which has the ability to bring about the healing deficiencies and wounds". Sammar is portrayed as a typical woman "with simple needs" (p. 38). Conversely, she masterfully and resolutely fulfils her duty as a cultural translator. Rae, on the other hand, rejects absolute truths that tend to essentialise the other: "When he appeared on TV or was quoted in a newspaper he was referred to as an Islamic expert, a label he dislikes because, he told Sammar, there could be no such

monolith" (p. 7). Thus, *The Translator* is a heteroglossic narrative set against cultural monolithic discourses and questioning normative assumptions about religion, orientalism, masculinity, and gender. Although discomfort is undoubtedly present in Aboulela's transcultural romance as a result of the romantic systems and structures, which unequivocally house its protagonists, she employs these very anxieties to address the problems they initiate by elevating above them:

> In the distant past, Muslim doctors advised nervous people to look up at the sky. Forget the tight earth. Imagine that the sky, all of it belonged to them alone. […] But the sky was free, without any price, no one I knew spoke of it, no one competed for it (Aboulela 1999: 32).

Furthermore, none of those individuals involved in cross-cultural relations have authority over one another. Instead, the very characteristic of these relations is each person simultaneously talks to herself and to each other. This is, as Bakhtin (2010: 147) affirms, creates heteroglossia as the simultaneous presence of utterances with their social, historical, and psychological contexts. Under these conditions, Aboulela restructures a narrative wherein agency and voice, necessary for the production of meaning, are granted for all: "What was real was that she had been given permission to think and talk, and he would not be surprised by anything she said. As if he had given her a promise, never to be taken back" (p. 33). Hence, the novel's protagonists not only overturn the stereotypes engulfing their relationship, but also effect change to the problematic issues surrounding this relationship. Despite her initial anxiety and discomfort, which seem to place major setbacks on her relationship with Rae, Sammar enacts the romance relationship with a resolution to redeem the orientalist masculine figure. In fact, this becomes a turning point where Aboulela emphasises the convergence and interdependence of clashing discourses, including orientalism, Islam, religion, translation, academia and masculinity.

As such, Aboulela and her translator, Sammar, who acts as her mouthpiece, invent new hybrid vocabulary fashioning a narrative that not only provides a way out of the stagnant binaries of West and East, but also subverting the repressive constructions of religion and masculinity. Consequently, Sammar's profession and love sentiments are interconnected to achieve this aim. One the one hand, as Alghamdi (2014: 24) argues, "Sammar plays a dangerous game in her relationship with the Orientalist, associating herself so intimately with the very tropes that compose the colonialist narrative and the patriarchal romance". At the same time, she presents themes that powerfully subvert antagonist narratives whether produced in the Western or in the Arab worlds. Such an underground voice reverses and destabilises the infrastructures of colonial romance captured by Spivak's famous quote: "white men save brown women from brown men" (2023: 93). Through the act of translation, on the other hand, Aboulela grants her female protagonist an inherent power over multiple intercultural meanings to help others find their way

between them. Arguably, since a translator's role is to fill an existing gap, the necessity of having one could be seen as a deficiency on monologic cultural meanings. However, this role is deemed as the "very essence of communication" (Alghamdi: 25) as bequeathed with bifocal camera that not only shows two cultures simultaneously, but also glues cultures in the same portrait.

## 5. Conclusion

Weaving together two temporal strands in the history of Arab Western encounters that unfold across Egypt, England, and the United States, Soueif's *The Map of Love* demystifies the narratives of estrangement through self-critique and reflections. It unpacks the enduring nature of cross-cultural connections and the shared human experiences that transcend geographical boundaries. Allowing differences rooted in cultural experience albeit receptive to interconnectedness, rather than suppressing them, is what allows Anna and Sharif – as well as their descendants – to succeed in their cross-cultural interactions. Similarly, in *The Translator*, Rae and Sammer create a relationship that is far more symbiotic than resiliently defying the odd and clashing voices surrounding them. By relocating religion in the private rather than cultural sphere of her protagonist, Aboulela is acutely aware of the flows of how religion signals a narrow approach to promote successful cross-cultural relations. Above all, Sammar's private prayers that Rae might convert to Islam were solely channelled to herself. Furthermore, Aboulela deftly moves beyond the functionalities of binary logic into a more radical state of pluralism by examining the true power of love, translation and scholarship as transformative and emancipatory incentives.

Both writers provide contemporary perspectives on Arab Western relations from their own transcultural perspectives. They experiment with relevant themes and narrative techniques to create bridges at the intersection of cultures demonstrating original aesthetics of cultural representation. In their artistic exploration, they transcend cultural boundaries by employing unconventional narrative structures, nonlinear chronologies, and multiple perspectives. More notably, their work fosters dialogue, empathy, and mutual recognition, creating spaces where diverse worldviews converge. Departing from the conventional opposing narratives that have historically defined the relationship between the West and the East, they offer a fresh, audacious aesthetics that subvert norms and redefines cultural portrayals. They also leverage their liminal existence at the borderlands between cultures to serve as a catalyst for meaningful cross-cultural conversations, which, in turn, create a vibrant meeting locale, namely Mezzaterra. As Bakhtin (2013: xxii) explains, "What we seek is a representation, at whatever time or place and in whatever genre, of human 'languages' or 'voices' that are not reduced into, or suppressed by, a single authoritative voice". As their happy ending narratives imply, these works advance gratifying cross-cultural encounters between Arab and Western worlds. This encounter is depicted as an art of coexisting with the Other, a thesis that emanates from advocating dynamic reciprocity and critical perspectives based on both proximity and distance. Therefore, through cross-

cultural romances, friendships, translation, and inter-cultural marriages, their characters simultaneously inhabit in the inside and outside of culture, a radical locus of enunciating and negotiating difference. Thus, rather than offering a superficial acceptance of diversity that inevitably maintains cultural inequality, both writers offer a nurturing connection between cultures as something that must be shared, as well as critiqued, in order to be meaningful. Ultimately, their creations serve as a testament to the interconnectedness of human experience.

Ayman Abu-Shomar (Associate Professor) – Corresponding Author
School of Languages
The University of Jordan, Aqaba Campus, Jordan
ORCID Number: 0000-0003-0916-6819
Phone Number: 00962799024757
Email: a.shomar@ju.edu.jo

Wael Salam (Associate Professor)
School of Languages
The University of Jordan, Aqaba Campus, Jordan
ORCID Number: 0000-0003-3786-8607
Phone Number: 00962799452160
Email: wael_ju@yahoo.com

**References**

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

**Abulmaaty, Atif.** (2016). 'Alienation in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*'. *International Journal of English and Literature,* 11(2): 37-46.

**Abu-Shomar, Ayman.** (2019). 'Locating the intercultural discourse of Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*; cultural compatibility, clash of civilization or a not-yet-told Story?'. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 61(1): 52-66.
https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2019.1645088

**Abu-Shomar, Ayman.** (2022). 'We have much identity': Contesting the claimed hybrid identity in Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* and Ahdaf Soueif's In *the Eye of the Sun*.' *Identities*, 30(3): 452-469.
https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2022.2109280

**Alghamdi, Alaa.** (2014). 'Translating silence transmitting faith: Personal and cultural understanding in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator'*. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 5(1): 23-33.

**Awad, Yousef.** (2011). Cartographies of identities: Resistance, diaspora, and trans-cultural dialogue in the works of Arab British and Arab American women writers. Unpublished PhD Thesis, The University of Manchester, UK.

**Bakhtin, Mikhail.** (2010). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Texas: University of Texas Press.

**Bakhtin, Mikhail.** (2013). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

**Ben Amara, Ahmed**. (2024). 'The Politics of space in Leila Aboulela's Minaret and Jamal Mahjoub's *A Line in the River*: Khartoum, city of memory'. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 24(1): 267-284.
https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes.v24i1.551

**Campbell, Charles.** (2019). 'The captivity narrative and East-West understanding in Aboulela's The Kindness of Enemies'. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 19(1): 53-70.
https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.19.1.3

**Clark, Katerina and Michael Holquist.** (1984). *Mikhail Bakhtin.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

**Davis, Emily.** (2007). 'Romance as political aesthetic in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of love*'. *Genders* 45 (2): 28-41.

**DeMunck, Victor C., A. Korotayev, Janina de Munck and Darya Khaltourina.** (2011). 'Cross-cultural analysis of models of romantic love among US residents, Russians, and Lithuanians. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 45(2): 128-154.
https://doi.org/10.1177/10693971103933

**Gani, Jasmine.** (2019). 'Arab nationalism in Anglophone discourse: A conceptual and historical reassessment'. In Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine Gani (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and North African State and States System*, 1-29. London: Routledge.

**Hamdar, Abir.** (2012). 'Contemporary Arab women writers: Cultural expression in context'. *Women: A Cultural Review*, 23(1): 102-104. https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2012.644682

**Hassan, Waïl.** (2014). *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Massad, Joseph.** (1999). 'The politics of desire in the writings of Ahdaf Soueif'. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 28(4): 74-90. https://doi.org/10.2307/2538394

**Mirsky, Maya.** (1999). '*The Map of Love*: Short fiction in anthology by Ahdaf Soueif'. *Critique Magazine*, I: 50-66. http://critique magazine.com/article/mapoflove.html (Retrieved on 12 October, 2022).

**Phillips, Christina.** (2012). 'Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*: Reading Islam in the West'. *Wasafiri*, 27(1): 66-72. https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2012.636944

**Said, Edward.** (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage.

**Salam, Wael and Othman Abualadas**. (2020). "Cultural Authenticity Versus Hyphenated Identities: Transnational Modes of Belonging and Citizenship in *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly*." *CEA Critic*, 82 (1): 52–68.

**Saleh, Lina, Sabrine Saleh and Yaser Al-Shboul.** (2024). 'Mystical and archetypal journeys in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons'*. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 24(2): 55-72. https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes.v24i2.590

**Sarnou, Dalal.** (2014). 'Narratives of Arab anglophone women and the articulation of a major discourse in a minor literature'. *International Studies: Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, 16(1): 65-81.

**Sarnou, Dalal.** (2016). 'The polyphonic, dialogic feminine, narrative voice in Anglophone Arab women's writings'. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 8(3): 202-212.

**Sellman, Johanna.** (2018). 'A global postcolonial: Contemporary Arabic literature of migration to Europe'. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54(6): 751-765. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1555207

**Soueif, Ahdaf.** (1999). *The Map of Love*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

**Soueif, Ahdaf.** (2010). *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground*. USA: Anchor.

**Spivak, Gayatri.** (2023). 'Can the subaltern speak?'. In Peter H. Cane and Mark Harrison (eds.), *Imperialism*, 24-28. London: Routledge.

**Zannoun, Ghadir K.** (2019). 'Home as love: Transcending positionality in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*'. *Humanities*, 8(2): 1-18.