

Migration, Social Representation, and Hostland Politics: A Study of Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

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Abstract

This article examines Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* through the analytical lens of Serge Moscovici's Social Representation Theory, exploring how the novel portrays the experiences of a Sudanese Muslim woman negotiating the hostland politics of contemporary Scotland. Drawing on close textual analysis, the article argues that racial discrimination, Islamophobia, identity crisis, destitution, frustration, and social alienation experienced by the protagonist, Sammar, are not merely individual psychological conditions but manifestations of hegemonic social representations through which the Scottish host society denies the African Muslim migrant full humanity, dignity, and equal rights. The study further demonstrates how Sammar develops emancipated and polemical counter-representations of herself through her Islamic faith, spiritual self-realisation, and a gradual re-evaluation of homeland, thereby affirming her inherent human dignity in the face of dehumanising social constructions. By relating the novel's literary representations to the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the article argues that *The Translator* functions as a sustained literary critique of the hegemonic representations underpinning contemporary Western host societies while asserting the humanity, agency, and rights of the African Muslim migrant.

Keywords: Migration; Social Representation Theory; transnationalism; Islamophobia; hostland politics; identity crisis; human rights; Leila Aboulela; *The Translator*; African migrant literature; Muslim women.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of how African migrants are represented and how they represent themselves in contemporary Western host societies has become one of the most pressing concerns of the twenty-first century. As millions of postcolonial African subjects cross national borders in search of improved living conditions, European and North American host societies have increasingly constructed representational frameworks that position African and Muslim migrants within categories of threat, burden, and cultural incompatibility. This process aligns with Serge Moscovici's theory of social representation, which argues that communities do not passively receive information but actively construct "systems of values, ideas and practices" to "orient themselves in their material and social world" and to make the unfamiliar familiar (Moscovici 214). Denise Jodelet further clarifies that these representations are "socially elaborated and shared" and that they "contribute to the construction of a common reality" through which groups classify and evaluate others (Jodelet 47). Consequently, as Gerard Duveen notes, social representations function as "a code for naming and

classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world," a code that often denies migrants full humanity, dignity, and equal participation in social life (Duveen 263). It is within this social and political context that Leila Aboulela's debut novel *The Translator* demands critical attention not merely as a narrative of love and grief, but as a sophisticated literary intervention into the politics of migration, Islam, identity, and belonging in contemporary Britain.

Aboulela, a Sudanese Muslim writer who has lived in Aberdeen, Scotland, and across the Gulf region, brings to the novel both biographical insight and political urgency. Through the story of Sammar, a Sudanese widow employed as an Arabic-English translator at a Scottish university, Aboulela creates one of the most psychologically nuanced and humanistically compelling portrayals of an African Muslim migrant woman in contemporary Anglophone literature. *The Translator* operates simultaneously as a love story, a narrative of spiritual growth, a meditation on grief and loss, and an exploration of what it means to be a Muslim African woman in a society that has already determined—before

any personal encounter—who she is, what she represents, and the place she is expected to occupy. The novel therefore offers a fertile site for examining the processes through which migrants are represented, categorised, and positioned within the social imagination of the host society.

This article examines how *The Translator* constructs, negotiates, and transforms social representations of identity, belonging, and human dignity through the experiences of its Sudanese Muslim protagonist in the Scottish hostland. It employs Serge Moscovici's Social Representation Theory as its principal analytical framework and human rights discourse as its normative framework. The article hypothesises that Sammar's experiences in Aberdeen extend beyond an individual story of grief, displacement, and adaptation. Rather, they constitute a literary representation of the hegemonic social frameworks through which the African Muslim migrant is denied recognition, dignity, and full participation within the host society. Against these exclusionary representations, Sammar develops emancipated and polemical counter-representations grounded in Islamic faith, cultural continuity, and spiritual self-realisation. Through this process, she reclaims agency and affirms her inherent human dignity in the face of social and cultural marginalisation. The relevance of Social Representation Theory to this study lies in its capacity to explain how societies produce shared meanings about particular groups and how such meanings shape social relationships and institutional practices. Migration is not merely a process of physical movement across borders; it is also a process of interpretation in which migrants become objects of classification, judgement, and symbolic construction. Migrants are often represented long before they are personally encountered. Moscovici's theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for examining how collective beliefs about Islam, Africa, race, and cultural difference influence the experiences of migrant subjects in the hostland. It also enables an analysis of how literary texts challenge dominant representations and generate alternative ways of imagining identity, belonging, and human worth.

Migration cannot be reduced to the simple movement of people across space. Rather, it is a legal, social, cultural, and human process that unfolds within specific historical and structural conditions. The International Organisation for Migration provides a foundational legal definition, describing migration as "the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State" (136). While this definition establishes migration as a change of location, it does not fully explain the motivations, experiences, or meanings associated with such movement. Everett S. Lee extends this understanding by defining migration as "a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence. No restriction is placed upon such movement or upon the

distance involved, but there must be a change of residence" (49). Lee's emphasis on permanence distinguishes migration from temporary mobility such as travel or commuting. Legal and residential definitions alone, however, cannot explain why some people migrate while others remain despite similar circumstances. Addressing this limitation, Hein de Haas conceptualises migration as "the outcome of aspirations to migrate and the capabilities to realise these aspirations within given sets of constraints" (10). His formulation highlights the interaction between individual agency and structural conditions, demonstrating that migration depends not only on the desire to move but also on the capacity to do so. It likewise draws attention to the phenomenon of "non-migration," in which individuals aspire to migrate but lack the means or opportunities to realise that aspiration. Caroline B. Brettell further broadens the concept by arguing that migration cannot be captured through a single definition but requires "a range of descriptions to capture and compare the variations that migration processes encompass" because it is "flexible over the life course of an individual migrant or the domestic cycle of a household, varied within a population, subject to change over time, and laden with culturally contextualised meanings" (199). Migration, therefore, acquires different meanings depending on the migrant's social and historical circumstances; what signifies exile for one individual may represent opportunity or liberation for another. Finally, Daniels approaches migration from a philosophical perspective, arguing that "Migration might be conceived of as physical movements of humans from one place to another, but on a deeper level it should press us to recognise movement and mobility as basic organising forces of humans and all earthly reality" (18). Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that migration is simultaneously a legal process, a social practice, a cultural experience, and a fundamental dimension of human existence.

The experience of migration, however, does not end with physical movement. Once migrants arrive in the receiving society, they are interpreted through systems of social meaning that shape how they are perceived and treated. This process is captured by the concept of social representation. According to Serge Moscovici, social representations are "systems of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; second, to enable communication to take place among the members of a community" (214). Social representations therefore enable societies to make unfamiliar people and experiences intelligible by transforming them into recognisable categories. Denise Jodelet further explains that social representations constitute "a form of practical knowledge that link a subject to an object. They are socially elaborated and shared, and they contribute to the construction of a common reality" (47). Consequently, when host

societies speak of "migrants" or "refugees," they are not merely describing objective realities but reproducing collectively constructed meanings that often acquire the status of unquestioned truth. Gerard Duveen underscores the political implications of this process, arguing that social representations "provide groups with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world" (263). The power to name and classify is simultaneously the power to define belonging, difference, and exclusion. Long before migration is regulated through law or public policy, therefore, it is first interpreted through systems of social representation.

These representational processes are subsequently reinforced through hostland politics, understood as the political, legal, and social mechanisms through which receiving societies regulate the lives of migrants. Gabriel Sheffer defines the hostland as "the country of residence of a diaspora group, whose governments and societies develop specific policies and attitudes toward the diaspora" (12). Hostland politics therefore encompasses both official state policies and the informal attitudes that shape everyday interactions. Kim D. Butler expands this understanding by describing the hostland as "the geographic and political space in which diasporic communities negotiate identity, citizenship, and belonging in relation to the dominant national culture" (194). Belonging, in this sense, is not automatically granted but continually negotiated within the cultural, linguistic, and historical norms of the receiving society. Rainer Bauböck further demonstrates how these negotiations become institutionalised, observing that "Host countries regulate the terms of membership for immigrants through citizenship laws, anti-discrimination statutes, and policies of integration or multiculturalism" (309). Such terms of membership ultimately determine whether migrants are accepted as citizens, tolerated as temporary residents, or excluded as permanent outsiders.

Taken together, these three concepts form the conceptual foundation of this study. Migration refers to the movement of people shaped by legal, social, cultural, and structural conditions (IOM 136; Lee 49; de Haas 10; Brettell 199; Daniels 18). Social representation explains how that movement is interpreted through shared systems of meaning that classify individuals and define their place within society (Moscovici 214; Jodelet 47; Duveen 263). Hostland politics describes the political and institutional structures through which those representations are translated into policies, practices, and everyday experiences of inclusion or exclusion (Sheffer 12; Butler 194; Bauböck 309). Examined together, these concepts provide an integrated framework for understanding how migration is experienced not simply as movement across borders but as an ongoing negotiation of identity, belonging, and human dignity within the host society.

Conceptualising Social Representation Theory

Serge Moscovici developed Social Representation Theory in his landmark 1961 doctoral thesis, *La Psychanalyse, Son Image et Son Public*, in which he examined how the Parisian public constructed shared and simplified understandings of psychoanalysis through the cognitive processes of anchoring and objectification (Moscovici 1961). The theory challenges the assumption that individuals and communities passively receive knowledge about the social world. Instead, Moscovici argues that social groups actively construct "systems of values, ideas and practices" through which they "orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it" and "enable communication to take place among the members of a community" (Moscovici 1988, 214). Social representations are therefore collective systems of meaning through which societies interpret reality, organise experience, and regulate social interaction.

This emphasis on the active construction of knowledge has been reinforced by subsequent scholars. Wagner and Hayes describe social representations as "a set of cognitions shared by members of the same social group regarding social objects" that function as "a practical theory of reality" guiding both perception and social action (Wagner and Hayes 2005, 25). Likewise, Farr argues that the theory is primarily concerned with "the content and process by which social groups construct and transform reality" rather than with individual cognition alone (Farr 1993, 15). Social representations should therefore be understood not merely as individual perceptions but as collectively produced systems of meaning that shape how groups interpret themselves and others.

Two complementary processes underpin the production of social representations: anchoring and objectification. Anchoring refers to the process through which unfamiliar or threatening phenomena are interpreted by relating them to existing categories of knowledge, thereby rendering the unfamiliar familiar and intelligible. Objectification, by contrast, transforms abstract ideas into concrete images, symbols, or objects that can be easily communicated and shared within everyday social life. As Marková explains, anchoring and objectification operate dialogically because "representations are produced and reproduced in the process of communication and interaction" between individuals and groups (Marková 2000, 419). Bauer and Gaskell similarly argue that objectification enables public discourse by "convert[ing] abstract scientific ideas into images that can be circulated in the media and in everyday talk" (Bauer and Gaskell 1999, 168). Together, these processes explain how complex social realities become simplified, normalised, and widely accepted within particular communities. Beyond these cognitive processes, Moscovici identifies three principal forms of social representation: hegemonic, emancipated, and polemical. Hegemonic representations are

collectively shared by the dominant social majority and are reinforced through institutions, public discourse, and cultural practices. Because of their widespread acceptance, they often appear natural, objective, and resistant to challenge. Emancipated representations emerge within minority groups as alternative interpretations grounded in their distinctive social experiences and perspectives. Polemical representations, in contrast, arise through direct conflict between opposing social groups and function as explicit counter-representations to dominant systems of meaning. Howarth highlights the political significance of these distinctions by arguing that hegemonic representations frequently serve to "maintain existing power relations," whereas polemical representations operate as "tools of resistance" through which marginalised groups challenge dominant ideologies (Howarth 2006, 71). Similarly, Jodelet observes that social representations are "socially elaborated and shared, and they contribute to the construction of a common reality" that remains continually contested and renegotiated (Jodelet 1991, 47).

Social representations are therefore neither fixed nor permanent. Rather, they are continuously produced, reproduced, and transformed through communication, social interaction, and historical change. As Duveen argues, representations "provide groups with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world" (Duveen 2001, 263). Breakwell likewise maintains that the content and organisation of social representations evolve in response to changing social conditions, perceived threats, and identity processes, describing them as "dynamic systems that evolve as groups negotiate new social realities" (Breakwell 1993, 180). Social representations should therefore be understood as fluid rather than static, reflecting the ongoing negotiation of meaning within society. Viewed collectively, these principles make Social Representation Theory particularly relevant to the present study. The theory demonstrates that societies do not merely reflect reality; they actively construct it through the interrelated processes of anchoring and objectification and through the continual negotiation of hegemonic, emancipated, and polemical representations. This perspective provides a powerful analytical framework for examining how *The Translator* exposes dominant representations of African Muslim migrants while simultaneously constructing alternative representations grounded in dignity, agency, faith, and belonging.

Social Representation Theory is particularly well suited to the analysis of *The Translator* for three interrelated reasons. First, it explains the cognitive and social processes through which Islamophobia operates in the novel by revealing how the hegemonic representation of Islam as synonymous with terrorism positions Sammar within a pre-existing category of suspicion and threat before any meaningful interpersonal encounter

occurs. In doing so, the theory exposes how collective beliefs, rather than individual interactions alone, shape the migrant's social identity and lived experience. Second, the theory illuminates the counter-representational strategies through which Sammar resists dominant constructions of her identity. Through prayer, the observance of the hijab, Islamic cultural practices, and an evolving process of spiritual self-realisation, she constructs emancipated and polemical representations that challenge prevailing stereotypes. These alternative representations affirm her dignity, agency, and moral worth, while resisting the reductive images imposed upon her by the host society. Third, Social Representation Theory establishes an important connection between the novel's literary representations and the broader framework of international human rights. It enables the discriminatory practices embedded within hegemonic representations of African Muslim migrants to be understood not merely as forms of social exclusion but as violations of internationally recognised principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the same time, Sammar's counter-representations emerge as assertions of fundamental rights that demand recognition and protection.

The relevance of the theory extends beyond these analytical functions. It makes possible a reading of *The Translator* that moves beyond an exclusively personal or psychological interpretation by demonstrating that Sammar's experiences of Islamophobia, alienation, and identity conflict are produced within broader systems of social meaning that operate through institutions, political discourse, media representations, and everyday social interactions. Rather than treating these experiences as isolated instances of personal prejudice, the theory reveals them as manifestations of deeply embedded representational structures that shape public attitudes and social practices. In this respect, Social Representation Theory provides the analytical framework most appropriate to the concerns of *The Translator*. It explains not only what Sammar experiences, but also how and why those experiences are generated within the representational order of the Scottish host society. Equally important, it illuminates the symbolic and cultural resources through which she challenges those dominant constructions, reclaims her agency, and affirms her humanity, dignity, and rightful place within the social world.

Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and the Paradox of Hostland Migration

Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* opens with an evocative image that immediately establishes the representational landscape of Sammar's experience in Aberdeen—a landscape marked by exclusion, alienation, and the seemingly unbridgeable distance between the migrant's self-understanding and the dominant social representations of the host society. In the novel's opening dream, Sammar watches from her window as the people

of Aberdeen move through the rain like "super humans, giants who would not let the elements stand in their way" (Aboulela 1). Through the combined use of metaphor and hyperbole, Aboulela transforms the inhabitants of Aberdeen into superhuman figures whose effortless adaptation to the Scottish climate symbolises their unquestioned belonging within that social space. By contrast, Sammar remains a detached observer, positioned outside the community she inhabits. The image of the window further deepens this sense of estrangement. Functioning as a powerful symbol, it separates vision from participation, proximity from belonging, and physical presence from social inclusion. Sammar is able to observe the life of the host society, yet she remains unable to participate fully in it. From the perspective of Social Representation Theory, this image objectifies the invisible boundary that separates the socially recognised Scottish citizen from the racialised and Muslim migrant Other. Aboulela therefore transforms an ordinary domestic object into a concrete representation of the cognitive and symbolic structures through which exclusion is produced and sustained throughout the novel. Sammar's alienation is reinforced through the description of her living space, which has been stripped of the ordinary objects through which personal identity and emotional attachment are expressed: "For four years, she wears no colors, no perfume, no make-up, and she has minimum things or furniture in her home if it can be called home since she lived in a room with nothing on the walls, nothing personal, no photographs, no books; just like a hospital room" (Aboulela 22). The dominant literary device is imagery. The repeated accumulation of negatives—"no colors," "no perfume," "no make-up," "nothing on the walls," "no photographs," and "no books"—constructs a powerful visual representation of emotional emptiness and social dislocation. These absent objects are not merely household possessions; they are symbolic markers through which memory, identity, and belonging are anchored. Their absence suggests that Sammar has been deprived of the material and emotional resources through which individuals ordinarily construct and communicate a coherent sense of self.

The comparison of her room to "a hospital room" further intensifies this symbolism. The simile objectifies Sammar's psychological and social condition by presenting her domestic space as one associated with illness, transience, and emotional vulnerability rather than comfort or permanence. A hospital room is designed for treatment rather than habitation; similarly, Sammar's accommodation reflects a life suspended between loss and recovery, belonging and displacement. Through this image, Aboulela externalises the psychological consequences of migration and grief, allowing Sammar's emotional condition to become visible within the physical environment she occupies. Amid this profound isolation, prayer emerges as Sammar's sole source of stability and continuity: "her prayers were the only connection she maintains with reality" (Aboulela). Here,

prayer functions metaphorically as an anchor that secures her identity within a stable moral and spiritual framework despite the instability of her social surroundings. From the perspective of Social Representation Theory, Islamic faith provides an alternative system of meaning that resists the exclusionary representations imposed by the host society. Rather than allowing dominant social representations to define her identity, Sammar remains connected through prayer to the wider global Muslim community, whose shared beliefs, practices, and values constitute an emancipated representational community that transcends geographical distance and cultural isolation. Prayer therefore becomes more than a personal act of devotion; it functions as a form of symbolic resistance through which Sammar preserves her dignity, affirms her identity, and sustains a sense of belonging in the face of social marginalisation.

The hegemonic representation of Islam is embodied throughout *The Translator* in a series of social encounters that reveal how prejudice operates across multiple levels of the host society, from institutional settings to everyday interpersonal relationships. One of the earliest examples occurs when a colleague warns that if Rae were to convert to Islam, it would amount to "professional suicide" because he would be regarded as having joined "the religion of terrorist and fanatics" (Aboulela 21). This remark demonstrates how the dominant representation of Islam has become anchored within the cognitive category of terrorism, shaping perceptions long before individuals are encountered on their own terms. Particularly significant is the fact that this judgement emerges within the university, a space conventionally associated with intellectual openness and critical inquiry. Aboulela therefore suggests that Islamophobic representations are not confined to overtly prejudiced environments but permeate institutions that present themselves as liberal and enlightened. A similar process is evident in the treatment of Rae's uncle, who converted to Islam while living in Egypt and embraced Sufism. Rather than recognising his conversion as a legitimate spiritual choice, his family declares him "missing in action" (Aboulela 18). The military expression functions symbolically by equating religious conversion with disappearance, loss, or even death. From the perspective of Social Representation Theory, this metaphor objectifies the dominant perception that conversion to Islam constitutes a complete rupture with British identity and family belonging. Religious transformation is therefore represented not as personal conviction but as social abandonment.

The most explicit expression of this hegemonic representation occurs during the Gulf War, when Sammar becomes the target of overt racial and religious hostility: "you wog bastard, may I remind you that England is a Christian country, and it would be a good thing if you and all the rest of the odious wog bastards were to go back to the land of Allah" (Aboulela 100–

101). Presented through direct speech, the insult is delivered without narrative mediation, giving the episode an immediacy that captures the lived reality of everyday racism and Islamophobia. The racial slur "wog" anchors Sammar within colonial constructions of racial inferiority, reducing her to a derogatory category that predetermines her social identity. Equally significant is the command that she return to "the land of Allah," which objectifies Islam as an alien, geographically bounded religion that has no legitimate place within British society. The statement therefore reinforces the ideological opposition between a supposedly Christian Britain and a Muslim "elsewhere," denying the possibility that Islamic identity can legitimately coexist within the social and cultural landscape of contemporary Britain. Through this encounter, Aboulela exposes the operation of hegemonic social representations that classify Muslim migrants as perpetual outsiders whose presence is viewed as incompatible with the national community.

Aboulela further illustrates the subtle yet pervasive nature of these representations through an incident at Sammar's workplace. A petition is placed in her pigeon-hole asking her to condemn Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. The narrator observes that: "She was angered by the assumption that she must be for it because she was a Muslim from an Arab country" (Aboulela 99–100). This episode demonstrates the process of anchoring in one of its most consequential forms. Rather than being recognised as an individual capable of independent political judgement, Sammar is automatically classified according to a pre-existing representational framework that equates Muslim and Arab identity with political sympathy for violence. Her personal beliefs become irrelevant because dominant social representations have already assigned her a predetermined ideological position. Aboulela thus reveals how hegemonic representations erase individuality, replacing personal identity with collective stereotypes that shape everyday interactions within the host society.

Language occupies a central place in the construction, transmission, and contestation of social representations, making it indispensable to understanding Sammar's experience in Aberdeen. As Hala Mohamed observes, "language is a key to a person's self-identity. It enables the person to express emotions, share feelings, tell stories, and convey complex messages and knowledge" (qtd. in Mohamed 4). For migrants, language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a marker of identity, belonging, and cultural legitimacy. Sammar's position as an Arabic speaker living within a predominantly English-speaking Christian society therefore produces a profound linguistic and cultural displacement that shapes both her social interactions and her perception of self. Aboulela captures this sense of linguistic insecurity with remarkable psychological precision. Sammar observes

that: "In this country, when she spoke to people, they seemed wary, on their guard as if any minute she would say something out of place, embarrassing" (Aboulela 6). Her anxiety intensifies during a visit to the library, where she "felt like a helpless immigrant who didn't know any English, she imagined the English words lifting away from her brain, evaporating, forming a light mist" (Aboulela 13). Through the combined use of imagery and metaphor, Aboulela transforms linguistic uncertainty into a vivid sensory experience. The image of English words "evaporating" from Sammar's mind externalises the insecurity produced by continual exposure to a social environment in which she is conscious of being perceived as culturally different. The metaphor of the "mist" is particularly significant because it echoes the cold, grey atmosphere of Aberdeen that repeatedly mirrors her emotional state throughout the novel. Language thus becomes inseparable from place, suggesting that Sammar's confidence is shaped not simply by her linguistic competence but by the social environment in which that competence is continually evaluated. From the perspective of Social Representation Theory, Arabic is anchored within dominant representations of foreignness and cultural otherness, while English is objectified as the principal marker of intelligence, competence, and social legitimacy. Sammar's linguistic anxiety therefore reflects not personal inadequacy but the unequal symbolic hierarchy through which languages—and by extension their speakers—are socially valued.

The psychological consequences of this cultural displacement become increasingly visible in Sammar's everyday life. Aboulela conveys her emotional fragmentation through a series of seemingly insignificant domestic incidents: "She poured sour milk in her aunt's tea and had to make another cup. She sent Amir to school without making him brush his teeth, left the fan running in the empty bedroom all morning. At work she felt that she didn't care, it didn't matter at all that her adult students could barely read and write" (Aboulela 166). The dominant literary technique here is cumulative detail. Individually, each action appears trivial; collectively, however, they construct a compelling portrait of a woman whose emotional and psychological stability has been profoundly disrupted. Forgetfulness, carelessness, and emotional detachment become outward manifestations of an internal crisis of identity. From the perspective of Social Representation Theory, these domestic failures objectify the gradual disintegration of Sammar's previously stable framework of meaning. Her inability to care for routine responsibilities reflects a deeper erosion of the social roles through which she had previously understood herself as a mother, professional, and member of a community. Particularly revealing is her admission that "it didn't matter at all" whether her students succeeded, indicating that alienation has extended beyond her personal life to undermine the professional identity that once provided purpose and self-worth.

Sammar's emotional deterioration is intensified by Mahasen's harsh judgement: "All this is because you are useless... In the past you were lively and strong; now you've just become an idiot" (Aboulela 169). Rendered through direct speech, this accusation functions not merely as criticism but as an act of symbolic violence. Mahasen's words seek to redefine Sammar's identity by imposing upon her the labels of uselessness and stupidity. Rather than recognising the cumulative effects of grief, migration, and social exclusion, Mahasen interprets Sammar's condition as evidence of personal failure. Her judgement therefore reproduces a hegemonic representational framework rooted in patriarchal expectations that deny women the authority to define their own experiences. Through this interaction, Aboulela demonstrates how dominant social representations may be reproduced not only by the host society but also within the migrant's own cultural community, where they continue to regulate identity and reinforce existing relations of power. The cumulative effect of these experiences is a profound condition of social deprivation. According to John Pierson, social deprivation encompasses poverty, restricted access to employment, limited social support, exclusion from essential services, and negative community attitudes. Sammar's experiences embody many of these interconnected forms of deprivation. In Aberdeen, she confronts exclusion grounded in racial and religious prejudice; in Sudan, she encounters restrictive patriarchal expectations that further diminish her autonomy. By exposing the multiple and overlapping forms of exclusion that shape Sammar's life, Aboulela constructs one of the most nuanced literary representations of migrant social deprivation in contemporary African fiction, revealing that displacement is experienced not only through geographical relocation but also through the gradual erosion of identity, belonging, and human dignity.

Aboulela employs the physical environment of Aberdeen with remarkable literary precision, transforming landscape into an objective correlative for Sammar's psychological and social condition. Throughout the novel, the Scottish environment functions not merely as a geographical setting but as a symbolic extension of the migrant's emotional world, giving visible form to the otherwise intangible experiences of alienation, displacement, and exclusion. The persistent cold, rain, and grey skies of Aberdeen stand in sharp contrast to the warmth and brightness of Khartoum, becoming a sustained metaphor for the emotional distance and social hostility that characterise the host society's reception of the African Muslim migrant. This contrast between Aberdeen and Khartoum is vividly developed through Aboulela's descriptive imagery: "The road they walked across was pitted with potholes, strewn with rubble from the new buildings. Bricks and scattered cement were everywhere, the playthings of children who lived on the street... they were in torn stained clothes, bare feet covered with dust up to

their ankles..." (Aboulela 145). Through the combined use of imagery and contrast, Aboulela juxtaposes the visible material deprivation of Khartoum with Aberdeen's status as "a rich city of the First World." The sensory details of potholes, rubble, torn clothing, and dust foreground the structural inequalities that continue to shape postcolonial societies. This opposition objectifies the dominant representation of the developed West as a space of prosperity and the postcolonial world as a space of deprivation and lack. Such representations not only encourage migration but also produce expectations that render migrants particularly vulnerable when the imagined prosperity of the hostland fails to translate into genuine social acceptance or human dignity. Aboulela further develops this environmental critique through the recurring image of water scarcity in Khartoum: "In this land where the Nile flooded, no water. No water to have a shower with, flush the toilet with, cook, drink... Driving in the car across town to fill big jerry cans with water from someone else's garden tap. Tipping buckets of water down the toilet, scooping water from a pail to bathe." (Aboulela 146). The dominant literary device is irony. The paradox of severe water shortages in a country traversed by the Blue Nile and the White Nile exposes the contradiction between natural abundance and infrastructural failure. This irony objectifies the consequences of postcolonial governance, where abundant natural resources coexist with inadequate public services and deteriorating living conditions. The environmental crisis becomes even more disturbing when the available water is described as "dark brown with poisonous black" (Aboulela 161), rendering it unsafe for human consumption. Beyond its symbolic significance, this image also evokes the denial of the fundamental right to safe water and sanitation recognised within international human rights discourse, thereby extending the novel's critique beyond environmental neglect to questions of social justice and state responsibility.

Darkness becomes another recurring environmental metaphor through which Aboulela represents the realities of postcolonial Sudan: "All the neighbouring houses and roads were in darkness, proof of a major power cut and not a fault in the building" (Aboulela 146). Yet this darkness does not signify despair alone. It is immediately counterbalanced by another striking image: "the stars had mocked the light of the earth and won" (Aboulela 147). Through personification, the stars are presented as triumphing over the artificial light that human infrastructure has failed to provide. This image transforms environmental observation into symbolic resistance. While power failure reflects institutional inadequacy and state neglect, the brilliance of the stars suggests that beauty, hope, and resilience endure despite material deprivation. Within the framework of Social Representation Theory, the image functions as a polemical representation that contests dominant portrayals of Africa as irredeemably dark, stagnant, and hopeless. Aboulela instead offers an

alternative representation that affirms the resilience, dignity, and enduring humanity of those who inhabit marginalised spaces. The novel also exposes the economic dependency that characterises the postcolonial Sudanese state. The narrator observes: "Everything was precious in Khartoum, even ink and paper, because it was all imported, so hard to replace" (Aboulela 153). The use of synecdoche is particularly effective. Ink and paper, seemingly ordinary objects, come to represent the broader structural dependence of the Sudanese economy on imported goods. Their scarcity symbolises the enduring consequences of colonial extraction and uneven global economic relations that have limited domestic production and reinforced patterns of dependency. Through this simple domestic detail, Aboulela transforms everyday experience into a critique of postcolonial political economy, revealing how global inequalities become embedded within the ordinary realities of daily life.

Taken together, these environmental images demonstrate that landscape in *The Translator* is never merely descriptive. Aberdeen and Khartoum function as competing representational spaces through which questions of migration, identity, belonging, and inequality are negotiated. By contrasting the emotional coldness of the hostland with the material hardships of the homeland, Aboulela complicates simplistic binaries between a prosperous West and an impoverished Africa. Instead, she reveals that both spaces are marked by different forms of exclusion and deprivation, while simultaneously constructing counter-representations that affirm resilience, dignity, and the enduring humanity of migrant subjects. Against the hegemonic representations that deny her humanity, dignity, and social mobility, Sammar gradually constructs emancipated and polemical counter-representations grounded in Islamic faith, cultural memory, and spiritual self-realisation. Rather than accepting the identities imposed upon her by the host society, she develops new frameworks of meaning through which she reclaims agency and negotiates belonging on her own terms.

The failure of social elevation in Aberdeen begins within seemingly ordinary social interactions. When Sammar respectfully addresses an elderly neighbour as "aunt" in accordance with Sudanese cultural practice, the woman immediately responds: "I'm not your aunt... call me Lesley" (Aboulela 32). Through dialogue, Aboulela dramatises the collision between two contrasting systems of cultural meaning. In Sudanese society, kinship terms extend beyond biological relationships and signify communal respect and social solidarity. Lesley's correction rejects this cultural framework and reinforces the boundaries of British individualism. From the perspective of Social Representation Theory, the exchange demonstrates how everyday language functions as a mechanism through which inclusion and exclusion are negotiated. Sammar's attempt to extend communal belonging is refused,

confirming her position as an outsider within the host society's dominant representational order. This lack of recognition extends into the professional sphere. Although Sammar secures employment as a translator, the narrator reveals that her appointment results less from institutional appreciation than from historical necessity: "She had been lucky. There was a demand for translating Arabic into English, not much competition. Her fate was etched out by law that gave her a British passport, a point in time when the demand for people to translate Arabic into English was bigger than the supply" (Aboulela 73). The irony lies in the word lucky. Sammar's employment is not presented as the reward for academic competence or professional excellence but as the consequence of temporary market demand. Her linguistic expertise acquires value only because the institution requires it at a particular historical moment. Consequently, her professional inclusion remains conditional rather than transformative. Social Representation Theory exposes this as another expression of hegemonic representation: the migrant is accepted for utility rather than recognised as an equal participant within the social community.

Sammar's relationship with Rae constitutes the novel's most complex exploration of social elevation and cultural negotiation. She imagines that his intellectual curiosity about Islam may bridge the distance separating their worlds. Confident that faith can unite them, she tells him: "If you say the shahadah it would be enough. We could get married. If you just say the word" (Aboulela 127). The dialogue is significant because Aboulela deliberately retains the Arabic word shahadah rather than translating it into English. The untranslated term affirms the integrity of Islamic identity and resists complete assimilation into Western cultural discourse. Yet Rae's response reveals the limits of this imagined bridge. He insists, "It's not in me to be religious... I was not searching for something spiritual" (Aboulela 126), before finally dismissing her with the painful command, "get out of here... get away from me" (Aboulela 129). What begins as the possibility of mutual recognition ends in emotional and ideological separation. Sammar's rejection therefore signifies not only the collapse of a romantic relationship but also the failure of the social integration she had hoped it would symbolise. Aboulela avoids presenting Rae as a simple representative of Western privilege. He too experiences profound alienation. Reflecting on his unhappy domestic life, he confesses: "I used to feel such peace when I went to work in the morning... I stayed late, avoided going home. And the later I went home, the later the quarrel started... Sleep deprivation is torture. I used to doze off while driving" (Aboulela 40). His emotional exhaustion culminates in the symbolic episode of the missed flight to Paris, where he watches the departing aircraft through the airport window while clutching his inhaler (Aboulela 199). The symbolism is striking. The departing plane becomes an objective correlative for emotional paralysis and unrealised aspiration, while the inhaler reflects his

struggle to breathe within a life marked by spiritual dissatisfaction. Through Rae, Aboulela suggests that material comfort alone cannot guarantee fulfilment. The host society that marginalises Sammar also leaves many of its own members emotionally fragmented and spiritually unfulfilled.

While Rae remains trapped within this condition, Sammar gradually reconstructs her identity through faith. The prayer that initially functions as her final connection to stability becomes the foundation of an emancipated representation of herself. Instead of seeking validation from British society, she learns to derive dignity from her relationship with God, her religious convictions, and her cultural heritage. Her identity becomes internally grounded rather than externally dependent, allowing her to resist the stereotypes and exclusions imposed upon her by the dominant social order. This transformation is confirmed when Rae eventually returns and declares: "I have come to ask you to marry me. I am a Muslim now. Or trying to be" (Aboulela 186). His conversion does not represent the triumph of Sammar's earlier desire for acceptance. Rather, it confirms her own spiritual maturation. She no longer requires Rae's conversion to validate her identity. Instead, marriage becomes possible only after both characters undergo genuine personal transformation. Love is therefore reconstructed not as an instrument of social mobility but as the outcome of sincere spiritual commitment and mutual understanding. Equally significant is Sammar's changing perception of homeland. Her return to Sudan reveals that the homeland preserved in memory differs from the homeland she encounters in reality. She discovers familiar cultural warmth alongside persistent social restrictions and economic hardship. The idealised homeland and the idealised hostland are both exposed as incomplete representations. Through this experience, Sammar develops an emancipated understanding of home that transcends geographical boundaries. Home becomes a lived cultural and spiritual reality sustained through faith, language, memory, and community rather than a fixed national territory. This mature understanding reaches its fullest expression in her final reflection: "If I was someone else, someone strong and independent I would tell you now, I don't want to go back with you, I don't want to leave my family, I love my country too much" (Aboulela 198).

The conditional structure reveals not uncertainty but profound self-awareness. Sammar fully recognises the emotional cost of her decision while acknowledging the complexity of her attachments to both Sudan and Scotland. Her choice is neither surrender nor defeat. It represents the exercise of informed personal agency by a woman who has successfully negotiated competing cultural identities without abandoning either. In Social Representation Theory, this marks the emergence of an emancipated representation through which she defines herself independently of the

hegemonic classifications imposed by the host society. Ultimately, *The Translator* demonstrates that the migrant's struggle is not merely for legal residence or economic survival but for the right to define oneself beyond the stereotypes of race, religion, and nationality. Through Sammar's journey, Aboulela challenges dominant representations of Muslim migrants and constructs a powerful literary counter-discourse that affirms human dignity, religious identity, and the possibility of belonging across national and cultural boundaries. In doing so, the novel reinforces the fundamental human rights principles of equality, freedom of belief, non-discrimination, and respect for human dignity, revealing literature itself as an important site for resisting exclusionary social representations.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* through the analytical framework of Serge Moscovici's Social Representation Theory to demonstrate how the novel constructs, contests, and transforms dominant representations of the African Muslim migrant woman within the socio-political landscape of contemporary Scotland. The analysis has shown that Sammar's experiences of Islamophobia, racial discrimination, linguistic marginalisation, cultural displacement, and social exclusion are not isolated incidents of personal prejudice but manifestations of hegemonic representational systems that classify Muslim and African identities through discourses of otherness, suspicion, and cultural incompatibility. These representations operate to restrict her opportunities for belonging, recognition, and social mobility while undermining the universal principles of equality and dignity articulated in international human rights discourse. The study further demonstrates that Aboulela does not leave her protagonist imprisoned within these exclusionary structures. Instead, Sammar gradually develops emancipated and polemical counter-representations rooted in Islamic faith, cultural memory, and spiritual self-realisation. Through these alternative frameworks of meaning, she rejects externally imposed identities and reconstructs herself as an autonomous subject whose dignity is grounded not in the approval of the host society but in her own religious convictions, cultural heritage, and moral agency. Her journey therefore illustrates that identity is neither fixed nor determined by dominant social narratives but continually negotiated through resistance, self-definition, and lived experience.

More importantly, this article argues that *The Translator* extends beyond the story of an individual migrant woman to become a sustained literary critique of the politics of representation that shape contemporary migration discourse. By exposing the mechanisms through which migrants are stereotyped, marginalised, and dehumanised, Aboulela simultaneously constructs a powerful counter-discourse that affirms the humanity, complexity, and resilience of African Muslim migrants.

The novel challenges readers to question dominant assumptions about migration, religion, and belonging while foregrounding literature as a vital space for resisting exclusionary ideologies. Ultimately, this study contributes to existing scholarship on *The Translator* by demonstrating that Social Representation Theory provides a productive framework for understanding how migration narratives expose the relationship between representation, power, identity, and human rights. It further shows that Aboulela's novel is not merely a narrative of displacement but a profound exploration of the struggle for recognition, dignity, and belonging in transnational spaces. In giving narrative voice to those who are frequently represented through prejudice and political rhetoric, *The Translator* reasserts the fundamental humanity of the migrant and reminds readers that genuine belonging can only emerge where diversity is recognised, dignity is respected, and human rights are upheld.

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