

# Revisiting Labeling Theory: An Islamic Feminist Approach to Aboulela's "The Translator"

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Received: October 25, 2017 Accepted: November 15, 2017 Online Published: February 3, 2018

doi:10.5539/ells.v8n1p28 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v8n1p28>

## Abstract

The core of the research lies in the analysis of the Western usage of the labeling theory, its impact on Arab/Muslim countries and how Islamic feminism came to overcome those imposed labels on Arab/Muslim women. Since the question of woman's role in Islam has come to be seen as one of its most controversial issues and the source of much criticism towards it, the present research investigates the efforts and reasons that led a large group of elite Arab women to secession from the global feminist institution and attempt to overcome western labeling through their own feminist school based on the Islamic religion.

The research deals with *The Translator* as an implicational example of Islamic feminist theories and its most important ideas. The analysis of Sammar's character, her life, and her relation with other characters helped in discussing and combining all these perverse issues of labeling, Islamic feminism and western control, through providing relative examples from the novel to support the discussion. Also, supporting the analysis of the text is three of the most important theories in the field of literature and research: power relations, deconstruction and the other theory.

**Keywords:** Islamic feminism, power relations system, labeling

## 1. Definition of Terms

**Islamic feminism:** represents the ideology which describes the discourse and the actions of those who protect women's rights within the context of an authentic or well understood Islam. (Alina Isac Alak, 2015)

Islamic feminist scholars used a combination of Islam and feminism to stand with and on behalf of all Muslim women in challenging the misogyny and control that European nations imposed over third world cultures. According to Fatema Mernissi, Islamic feminism is a fundamentalist wave of reforming the Arab feminist identity. (Mernissi, 2001)

**Power relations system:** is the knowledge of the world and ourselves that is fundamental to social relations and determined by the process of subjectivity, which is presented through the subject's interaction with itself and with others. Therefore, when a subject is involved in a power relation it costs him his freedom simply because, the subject will be controlled, directed and treated as a machine of a disciplinary imperative, yet this does not mean to disregard the subject's freewill and his/her ability to rebel, which makes it a mutual relationship of power exchange. In this way the subject becomes both the receiver and the producer of power. (Foucault, 1982)

**Labeling theory:** flourished during the 1960s and 1970s, to explain how our individual behaviors and self-identity is influenced by the terms used to describe or classify them, until we start to believe that these labels are part of who we are and we start to act in accordance with them. It is highly associated with the power relations theory and stereotyping because it tends to classify and label every minority that strays away from the cultural norms of the majority and explains why people's behavior clashes with these cultural and social norms. (Howard Becker, 1963)

## 2. Introduction

*The Translator* was written in 1999, in the days that to a large extent overturned the political, religious and cultural climate of the world and particularly of Arab countries. Things were in a rapid escalation on all humanitarian levels, paving the way for the emergence of new intellectual movements and new readings of the

status quo in an attempt to capture and make sense of this collapsing reality. Therefore, going back to that period of time and studying its political background would reveal a great amount of confusion yet, answer some basic questions about the emergence of one of the most important of these new intellectual movements: Islamic feminism.

Aboulela's novel *The Translator* is flourishing ground for the discussion of some major controversial points about Islamic feminism, its ideals and principles. The novel was written in a way that breaks up the norms on all cultural, political and religious levels, providing the reader with a third eye to examine reality as it is, within the context of Islamic feminist and postcolonial identifications.

Aboulela's *The Translator* creates a lens that seeks to clarify the picture of Arab/ Muslim women along with exploring the attitudes that influence this image. She crafts a very unique portrayal of Muslim women in the west who do not embrace Western culture; but rather her female characters seek solace in their firm religious identity to prove the centrality of women's rights in Islam. In portraying a powerful, independent, and moderate character for Arab women, she distinctively combines between the love of God and the love of man and at the same time presents an example of balance and moderation in how these women preserve their beliefs. Through using characters like Sammar, Yasmin, Mahasen and others she provides an inclusive analysis of the effect of labeling and normalization over the identity and independence of those women and concedes their Islamic feminist role in reshaping the Arab feminist identity and in overcoming the western imposed labels.

*The Translator* is a well-grounded crystallization of Islamic feminism, which is sought through the power relations system that paved the way for not only the analyses of the relation between Arabs and the west, but also for criticizing cultural systems and reshaping the Arab/ Muslim feminist identity; all through applying the power relation theories of control which Foucault explains and Said concurs with; that the relationship between the self and the Other in shaping any kind of relation is nothing but a scale of power where everyone possesses control to a certain level. The difference in levels of control constitutes the gradient of forces and creates what is called controller and controlled where each group falls under a particular label, serving a particular purpose.

Through breaking this barrier of the concept of the Other, the novel deals with the quintessence of Arab Muslim women. The novel provides a fair amount of space for women in general, Arab women in particular, and the other as a neglected category, to share their own experiences and speak in their own voices, by turning all the traditional scales in this literary context upside down.

### 3. Review of Relevant Studies

Ahmed (1992), focused her work mostly on gender and Islam, particularly examining women's roles in the Muslim world, fighting stereotypes about them, in both the Islamic and non-Islamic world. She tries to define an Arab feminist sensibility and reveals her frustration with Western feminists' assumptions about the Arab world because the picture they have about Muslim-Arabs is that they are ignorant, backward, irrational, and uncivilized and this is obvious in their concentration on polygamy, the veil, and female circumcision.

Wadud (1999), examines the position of women in Muslim cultures by following a particular criteria that reveals the real plan of Islam for women, she also focuses on helpful Qur'anic hermeneutics for the female experiences especially that the female voice could yield greater gender justice to Islamic thought and contribute toward the achievement of that justice in Islamic practice. She considers that the issues of women in society, economics, politics, or spirituality play an important part in the Muslim goal for modernity by preserving the past and benefiting appropriately from the new, in a way that redefines and changes the common imposed labels over Islam and Muslim women.

Mernissi (2001), was capable of indirectly drawing the attention to the West's tendency to misconstrue women's role in Arab/ Muslim societies by using one of the most famous female characters in Arabic literature, Scheherazade, to reflect the image of the powerful Arab female who uses her mental ability to seduce and manipulate a man's brain instead of physical attraction. She aimed to establish two representations for the harem or Scheherazade image, one from the Western perspective and the other from the Arab perspective to present the power of Muslim women, where she devoted her search to look for Islamic sources, etymology, art, religious law, and cultural history in order to show the difference not only between the two presentations, but also between the difference in the labels imposed on Muslim women depending on these two perspectives.

Badran (2002), raised a comparison between Islamic and secular feminist ideologies, through examining Muslim interpretations of feminism to explain why many Muslims perceive western feminism as an assault on their culture. She manages to draw a catching image of feminism in Islam through investigating western misunderstanding and oppressive labels of both feminism and Islam. Throughout her work, Badran traces the actual reasons behind the

rejection of Islamic feminism of all kinds of labels and dichotomies between east and west, believing that these labels were motivated by colonialism to deliver a rigid Muslim identity of feminism.

#### 4. The Method of the Study

For more than a decade critics and writers have been addressing women's issues, politics and love separately, they also categorized women into westerners and Arabs and dealt with them in separation so that the opinion of the West and its impressions about the Arabs became the common image for the world regardless of what the Arabs have to say about it. This led to very serious consequences in annihilating the Arab identity and controlling the fate of Arab/Muslim women.

This unstable relationship is clarified through the works of Foucault, Derrida and Said who all explained politics, literature and cultural issues through the system of binaries, notwithstanding the differences in their ideas in terms of process or labeling.

##### 4.1 Foucault's Power Relations System

Foucault's writing on power has been extremely influential in explaining how power produces subjectivity by focusing on the ways it invests the body. His theories being gender-neutral, Islamic feminists managed to apply them to their own needs, replacing females as a whole with Arab females and the actions of males upon females with the actions of western feminists upon Arab females (Marome, 2005) to challenge of paradigms of western thought taken for granted since 1990. He said "Nothing in man -not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men" (Foucault 1991, pp. 87-88). It is the same principle that Islamic feminism applied to explain their relation with western feminism, for the Arab woman has been measured and judged against the norm of the western female, the essential gender subject, the active, strong and moral half of the female whole. Therefore the Arab woman has come to be seen as the opposite against which the western feminists can compare themselves favorably.

##### 4.2 Derrida's Oppositions System

Islamic feminists also used Derrida's binary of the signifier and signified; or the system of oppositions to define their relation with western feminism, believing that their relationship with them is a relation of receiving not giving, where western feminism takes the place of the controller, superior, and the better half of the comparison. In their opinion this superiority gives them the right to announce their practices and methods as a fundamental basis in feminist viewpoint worldwide, regardless of the cultural distinctiveness and the readiness of Arab society to digest all these alien values.

In his argument, Derrida managed to breakup all of these cultural or social binaries of power and control as well as those of male / female. The deconstruction of life's simplest binaries created a different kind of relationship between the opposite sides; the superior is no longer superior, the weak is no longer weak and Arab woman is no longer an alien or Other. (Glocer, 2008)

The Islamic feminist campaign, has successfully utilized this Derridan treatment upon their relation with western feminism through going back to their own cultural background, religious texts and social legacy in order to form a stable, balanced identity that does not place them in a circle of conflict or force them to adapt to some social norms that do not fit with their own society, which is what the Arab/Muslim woman has been facing since the flourishing of western feminism around the globe.

##### 4.3 Said's Theory of the Other

Edward Said also explained the systematic way in which these emerging movements, like feminism, worked to control Arab culture, politics and identity though presenting them as Others. In his book *The Orientalist*, Said talked about the western imperial hegemony where he established his argument on the idea of colonial power-knowledge that he built on Michele Foucault's concept of power-knowledge relations. He both analyzed and challenged the cultural dichotomy and the concept of the West versus the East.

#### 5. The Emergence of Islamic Feminism

Arab/Muslim feminists used this dichotomy to explain their point of view, where they set the two worlds against each other to give an overall representation of the gender relations between Arab and western women. By representing Arab women as ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, and victimized, and western women as educated, modern, having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions, led to the creation of a huge gap in global feminism and consequently the questioning of its universality.

Based on Edward Said's theory of the self and the other, Arab feminists used the opposing presentations of

Western and Eastern women as the main concern of Islamic feminism, believing that this weak and deformed image of Eastern women is what damaged their identity. Therefore Islamic feminism tends to save their historical legacy and cultural privacy, believing that Arab women have their own feminist characteristics and that Islam has never been the problem in tying them up, but what placed them in the circle of conflict was their continuous attempts to stay within the Religious text and at the same time to keep up with the alien western culture that, on its surface, seems to show a great deal of concern for the struggles of oppressed women around the world. Nevertheless, the way it views feminism and the way of treating issues under its umbrella seemed to represent westerners in the image of the white savior and disqualify Arabs, women of color and Muslim women by ignoring the real source of the problems these women face.

Islamic feminists used these enlightening evidential discourses, like the power relations principle, and applied them to their arguments. Critics like Mai Yamani, Fadwa El Guindi, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, Fadwa Malti-Douglas, Fatima Mernissi and many others, de-constructively used these arguments to construct their own identity, to examine the power exchange relation between the controllers and controlled, and to explain how the superiority of western feminism in power relations manifests itself in modern society, where their practices manipulate, shape and mark the Arab female suggesting that feminism, specifically western feminism is a discipline that produces forms and identities and operates as an effective form of social control.

### **6. Labeling and *The Translator***

Aboulela successfully blended together the twin issues of power and labeling that greatly affected the identity of Arab/Muslim women. Sammar, being herself a part of this classification, whether in her job as a translator, her origin as an Arab and Muslim, her gender as a female, and even in her seemingly inappropriate relationship with Rae, expresses her frustration with labels saying that “In this country [England] everything was labeled, everything had a name...”. (1999, p. 4).

Aboulela presents Sammar as an expatriate Muslim woman who wears Hijab and follows Islamic doctrines which bring harmony and moderation to her life and allow her to stay within the realm of her own values, beliefs and cultural legacy without falling into the trap of having to recreate a suitable identity for herself based on the western model. These details in the life of the protagonist were specifically chosen by the author to upset the established image of the labeled Arab/Muslim woman as backward, terrorist and other.

The writer explains how Sammar was meant to overcome all these labels through her identity as an independent Muslim, introducing her as an intellectually mature woman who can decide her own destiny and control her own life regardless of the trio marginalization of being Muslim, female and culturally colonized. The writer broke the western stereotype about the Arab woman as being a follower of Eastern man, needing him to define her identity, protect her and thus control her independence

Sammar was the only Sammar at school and at college. When people talked about her they never needed to use her last name. (p. 5)

Also through the character of Mahasen, Aboulela presents a “woman who had an opinion on all things”. (1999, p. 5) This character is considered a qualitative leap in modern Arab feminist literature where the writer managed through Mahasen’s character to express the control and power of Arab women, breaking all Western stereotypes about Arab women, ““My aunt is a strong woman,” Sammar said, “a leader really.”” (1999, p. 7) Mahasen was not a woman ruled by her feelings or a typical housewife, but she took the place of the father and the mother in the house and had an apropos opinion in everything; her husband’s character is never even mentioned in the text as a sign of her intellectual and personal independence through which the writer came out of the type cast labeling of Arab women as obedient and subservient.

The strength and independence of Mahasen gives strong indication that eastern/ Muslim women can be leaders in rearranging chaos and organizing life around them. She intervenes and prevents Sammar from destroying her life when she was willing to marry the old Ahmad Ali Yassen, striking Sammar’s mind, and the reader’s, with the fact that the patriarchal structures that are manifested in religious tradition, saying that widows needed protection and economic support is an old rule that does not apply to women like Sammar who have economic independence, a good education and a supporting family.

On a purely feminist level, Aboulela also draws a simple but deep comparison between her protagonist and Rae’s ex-wife, for both of these women stand as representatives of their cultural, educational and religious backgrounds. The writer meant to deliver this comparison, where the ex-wife is presented as a modern, independent, beautiful and educated woman, while Sammar saw herself as a trapped, miserable, weak and far from civilized person, not because this is her character but because this is what alienation and labeling made of her.

Aboulela had a purpose in presenting the character of the ex-wife in opposition to Sammar, for both are single mothers, both have children and both have a career, yet Sammar faces the struggle of maintaining her identity, balancing between faith, love and exile and overcoming all the western labels which add more pressure and challenges to her life.

Both presentations are products of different political and cultural agendas which make them victims of western labeling that has been recruiting its media and feminist power to make the western woman appear in that perfect image of the ex-wife, even though this is far from reality because women in the west are exposed to all kinds of physical degradation and formalization in terms of beauty and other standards. As for the distorted image of Arab/Muslim women that was presented in the image of the trapped cat, it is also a label used by the west and imposed on the east for many years to present eastern women as submissive, weak and worthless which is utterly untrue as Sammar proves.

The writer also includes in her discussion a male character, Rae, who is a Middle-East historian and a lecturer on Third World Politics, to give another example on labeling the East.

He was a Middle-East historian and a lecturer in Third World Politics. He had recently written a book called *The Illusion of an Islamic Threat*. When he appeared on TV or was quoted in a newspaper he was referred to as an Islamic expert, a label he disliked because, he told Sammar, there could be no such monolith. (p. 5)

Even though he was not a Muslim, nor a believer in God, yet he was referred to as an Islamic expert, a label that changes government policy and public attitude toward those that come under its umbrella.

Ironically though, he is accused of many discriminating labels not only by his own society but also by Yasmine, i. e. Arabs, who labeled him as an orientalist where they are seen as scholars who destroyed the image of Islam. Regardless of the democratic image of Rae's society, the writer tried to prove that labeling is becoming a pervasive system in societies, where even a person who works with Islam, may be under the accusation of being a traitor, treated as an outsider and have his loyalty questioned.

Rae's character is also used to break another common stereotype, that of the male hero, that has been used for many years in both in western and Arab literature, as someone who is supposed to represent an example of the civilized Western male that saves Arab women from ignorance and backwardness. Again following the Derridan argument of deconstructing the stereotypical binaries and recreating a more suitable reality, Aboulela deconstructed the binary of the white male savior and the helpless Arab woman and replaced it with Rae's character, a conflicted man in terms of his religious beliefs, his identity, his look and attitude, which made him a questionable subject as a hero and more a representative for the theme of identity loss, and Sammar, who is presented as a character with religious maturity, intellectual independence and moderation, making *her* the more appropriate character to play the role of the savior hero.

Thus Aboulela succeeded in delivering a stronger message about the capability of shaping a profound identity for Eastern/ Muslim women to overcome the western cultural control and its stereotypical labeling.

Moving from the specific to the general, Aboulela describes finally the differences between Western and Arab societies at the cultural, economic and political levels. She explains in several places the impact of Western cultural colonization and domination over Arab countries in labeling them as third world, while Western countries have been labeled as first world countries. Furthermore, the west is portrayed as the land of freedom and equality, where everyone is free to choose his/her religion, political interest, and is treated fairly and justly, while third world countries are shown as backward, illiterate and uncivilized. However, the hypocrisy of the western system and their vague labels is exposed when we see that Arabs, Muslims and third world citizens, living in the west, are treated aggressively, labeling them as aliens and others.

The west's control over economic resources is yet another image of colonialism and control. As a result of the power relations system that put them under western control, almost all of the economy of Sudan was controlled by western forces which made life harder, more expensive and reduced the amount of production.

Going back to Khartoum opens the reader's eyes, giving them an insight to the reasons that placed these countries in such a position by showing the kind of destruction colonialism left in the lives of people who stayed long after it ended; and whether cultural or economic, and though the west has sought to bury this fact in their search for a democratic identity, yet the reality of the Third World will continue to point to the racism of the West against Arabs whose religion, Islam, calls for respecting all and accepting them.

## 7. Conclusion

Aboulela intelligently succeeded in portraying and recreating an identity for Arab/Muslim women through her

prose, on all the feminist, ideological and literary levels. She succeeded through her balanced narrative style to leave an Arab/ Muslim mark in the western literature and at the same time transfer what she wanted them to see about the ability of Arab women to overcome all the imposed western labels, and all through a modern and balanced intellectuality that expresses a great desire to establish an independent identity.

The events of 9/11 marked a turning point in the Arab feminist discourse because it changed how the world looks at Arabs and Muslims. The media and literature were used as weapons to formulate and control people's orientations and opinions on those brutal events and by relation their attitude toward Islam. Therefore Islamic feminism came to stand with and on behalf of all Muslim women in challenging the misogyny, labeling and control that European nations imposed over third world cultures; and to prove that it is not just a dialectic theory, but a way of life and a means of liberation from Western hegemony driven by the restructuring of Arab identity that opens the door for new possibilities for gender equality through questioning women's role in Arab societies and providing an alternative concept of women's rights in these countries.

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