

Arab Muslim Women's Anglophone Literature: Towards New Humanistic Role of Language?

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Abstract: Anglophone Arab Literature is indeed a 'promising' research field, not only because it is concerned with 'minor literature'; but also because it 'represents an important bridge of communication between the West and the Arab/Muslim world' (Sarnou, 2014). In this framework, it is intrinsic to consider the importance of language in community formation and the importance of community in language and culture promotion. The idea that language importance in community is two-fold: language has a role in community formation; and community-in this case 'minor' community- has a role in major language and/or culture promotion goes beyond the monolingual orientation of communication and is perfectly rooted in an objective cross-language dynamics philosophy as I see it. An analysis of instances from *The Translator*, a novel written by Leila Aboulela are to illustrate a new humanistic role of language.

Keywords: Arab women Anglophone literature, Arab Muslim women Anglophone literature, Humanistic roles of language

Introduction

Anglophone Arab Literature is indeed a 'promising' research field, not only because it is concerned with 'minor literature'; but also because it 'represents an important bridge of communication between the West and the Arab/Muslim world' (Sarnou, 2014). In this framework, it is intrinsic to consider the importance of language in community formation and the importance of community in language and culture promotion. The idea that language importance in community is two-fold: language has a role in community formation; and community-in this case minor community- has a role in major language and or culture promotion goes beyond the monolingual orientation of communication and is perfectly rooted in an objective cross-language dynamics philosophy as I see it. An analysis of instances from *The Translator* written by Leila Aboulela are to illustrate a new humanistic role of language.

Literature Review

A. Arab Muslim Women Anglophone Literature: A minority Literature?

Arab Anglophone literature is literature "conceived and executed in English by writers of Arabic background" (Sarnou, 2014, 66). Within this category, the sub-category of Arab women Anglophone literature, according to Sarnou (2014) exerted an influence on the contemporary international literature. She added that it is challenging to give a specific categorization to Arab women Anglophone literature due to the non-homogeneity of the Arab world.

In her article, Sarnou (2014) attempted to argue that Arab women Anglophone literature is to be considered as minor literature; referring to Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) theory of minor literature which is literature enacted by immigrants who - equipped with knowledge of two cultures-assume the role of "double-sighted" mediators, interpreters and cultural translators. Arab Anglophone literature, accordingly, being produced by immigrants or else citizens of Arabic descent towards a shared commitment falls into the category of minor literature. "It is a literature that is neither Arabic nor English, but is linguistically and culturally hybrid, discursively multidimensional and literarily heterogeneous" (Sarnou, 2014, 70). As far as Arab Muslim women Anglophone literature is concerned, Sarnou (2014) categorizes it as a minor literature within a minor literature. She argues that :

Because the fiction inspired by Islam is unusual and often rejected by Westerners in the English tradition that has been mystical, secular or Christian, (Aboulela's works for example) have challenged not only the English literary tradition that has been so many times Islamophobic, but also Modern Arabic literature that has been for many decades predominantly secular.

Many research works on the Arab Anglophone Literature, including Arab Women Anglophone Literature and Arab Muslim Women Anglophone Literature, (Salaita (2007), Almaleh (2009) and Hassan (2011)) focused on the literary framework that best fits these narratives as well as the influence of agency. I am rather interested in the new humanistic role of language in these narratives. I will continue using the terms "major language" and "minor community" though rejecting the "negative ideological" charge the terms hold. Challenging the terms' "negative ideological" charge needs to be dealt with in a different article. Sarnou (2014) states that these writings are important because they "offer the Western readers an **authentic** portrayal of the Arab world and Arab Muslim women, away from a false representation transmitted to them through manipulated media and channels" (Sarnou: 2014: 77). These writings neither represent the 'pure' Muslim perspective, nor the 'pure' Western perspective. It is a perspective 'in between'; a '**double sighted**' (Anzaldua: 1999) perspective, qualifying a 'hybrid identity'. From my own point of view, these '**authentic portrayals**' are the site of a "new" humanistic role of language .

The reciprocal influence of the "major language" on the "minor community" and the "minor community" on the "major language" is what I called the "New humanistic role of language". Language being the "channel" and the "voice" of a "minor community". The "channel metaphor" implies "major language" influence on the "minor community"; whereas the "voice metaphor" implies "minor community" influence on the "major language". In fact, it is very difficult to distinguish where the "major language" is used as a "channel" or as a "voice" for the "minor community" because of the overlapping that might happen between the two roles: the voice can be shaped by the channel; and the channel can be creatively restructured by the voice.

What follows, the focus will not be on specifying the difference between instance of the "major language" being a channel or a voice; as it will be on spotting "major language"/ "minor community" interaction. To illustrate and deepen the understanding of such roles, some cultural and linguistic aspects from Aboulela's *'The Translator'* are analyzed.

B. Analysis of instances of the “ new humanistic role of language ” in Aboulela’s *The Translator*

The translator is a ‘romance’ (Alghamdi, 2014) between a Sudanese translator and a Scottish scholar for whom she works. In what follows is an analysis of instances of the new humanistic role of language in the chronological order in which they appeared in the novel:

A first instance is when Sammar commented on the consequences of the harsh weather on herself as opposed to the *others*, right from the beginning of the novel:

At such times she would stay indoors and wait, watching from her window people doing what she couldn’t do: children walking to school through the swirling leaves, the elderly smashing ice on the pavement with their walking sticks. They were superhuman, giants who would not let the elements stand in their way

Sammar, the protagonist is describing what she would do in such a circumstance of harsh weather in comparison to what the children and elderly in Western culture would do. The disparity in behavior could be partly explained by geographical and economic exigencies of the Western life; but the expression ‘giants who would not let the elements stand in their way’ barely stands in opposition to ‘submitting to God’, wherein much of the struggle in life is, sometimes, substituted for submitting to God’s Will.

Awareness of the disparity of behavior and the causes behind that is the result of a hybrid experience culminating in a serene account about it. Right from the beginning there was what Alghamdi (2014, 32) described as “the possibility of ...successful coexistence with the Westerner, with no need for the subjugation of neither”. This is a new humanistic role of language.

Another instance of the new humanistic role of language is Sammar’s explanation of the linguistic properties of words in her culture, that of **Sammar** and **Tariq** respectively:

‘Do you pronounce it like the season, summer?’ Rae asked the first time she had met him. ‘Yes, but it does not have the same meaning.’ And because he wanted to know more she said, ‘It means conversations with friends, late at night. It’s what the desert nomads liked to do, talk leisurely by the light of the moon, when it was no longer so hot and the day’s work was over.’

Among the cacti, Rae had queried ‘Tariq?’, stressing the q. She answered, ‘Yes, it’s written with a *qaf* but we pronounce the *qafas* a g back home.’

While the exchange is of a linguistic nature, it is tolerance of and patience with these linguistic details which ensures a “new humanistic role of language”. Later towards the end of the novel, it is Sammar who is going to explain the linguistic properties of the name Rae, creating a rare type of interlingual **intertextuality**: like Rai (opinion) in Arabic, he has a lots of opinions!

In the following excerpt, a description of Sammar’s discovery of a ‘given’ essence of Rae; an intrinsic essence that she got hold of instinctively:

Here with others, he looked to her to be out of place, not only because of his looks but his manners. The same manners which made her able to talk to him, made the world vivid for the first time in years.

To be attracted to the manners of a man is a 'feminist' reaction par excellence. If the man belongs to a different culture, the insight is that there is a possibility of a human communion.

Conclusion

The results of the above discussion set hope for a personal motivation behind this research work. It is a belief that language can be a means of what E. Said (1994) called "the will to understand for the purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons". Language can have new humanistic roles!

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