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Translated People, Translated Texts: Language and Migration in some
Contemporary African Fiction

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Thesis Presented for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Department of English Language and Literature

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

February 2007

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Christina Steiner, February 2007

Abstract

This thesis examines contemporary migration narratives by four African writers living in the diaspora and writing in English: Leila Aboulela and Jamal Mahjoub from the Sudan, now living in Scotland and Spain respectively and Abdulrazak Gurnah and Moyez G. Vassanji from Tanzania now residing in the UK and Canada. Focusing on how language operates in relation to both culture and identity, this study foregrounds the complexities of migration as cultural translation. Cultural translation is a concept which locates itself in postcolonial literary theory as well as translation studies. The manipulation of English in such a way as to signify translated experience is crucial in this regard. The thesis focuses on a particular angle on cultural translation for each writer under discussion: translation of Islam and the strategic use of nostalgia in Leila Aboulela's texts; translation and the production of scholarly knowledge in Jamal Mahjoub's novels; translation and storytelling in Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction; and finally translation between the individual and old and new communities in Vassanji's work. The conclusion of the thesis brings all four writer's texts into conversation across these angles. What emerges from this discussion across the chapter boundaries is that cultural translation rests on ongoing complex processes of transformation determined by idiosyncratic factors like individual personality as well as social categories like nationality, race, class and gender. The thesis thus contributes to the understanding of migration as a common condition of the postcolonial world as well as offering a detailed look at particular travellers and their unique journeys.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor Professor Brenda Cooper for her ongoing support and enthusiasm in the process of writing this thesis. I am also most grateful to Vicky Igglesden whose suggestions of secondary material were always useful. Finally I am indebted to Carolyn Butler for her thorough editing work and to my family for their support to see this project through.

University of Cape Town

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Chapter One

Introduction: Cultural Translation in Contemporary African Migrant Literature

Diversity [...] means the human's spirit striving for a cross-cultural relationship, without universalist transcendence. Diversity needs the presence of peoples, no longer as objects to be swallowed up, but with the intention of creating a *new relationship*. (Glissant in Gysseles & Hoving 2001: 11, emphasis added)

Speaking across cultures is less popular than simply sticking to one's own crowd and telling them what they want to hear. Transcultural literature demands more, both of reader and writer. It does not have the support of those cheering waving crowds who would like you to be European or Third World, Black, African or Arab. It can only rely on that thin *crack of light* which lies between the spheres of reader and writer, [...] something is always lost in reaching for that light, but something is also gained: Gradually that crack grows wider and where there was once only monochrome light, now there is a spectrum of colours. (Mahjoub 1997: 4-5, emphasis added)

A Conversation about writing, translation and migration

In this thesis I want to present an artificially constructed conversation¹ about cultural translation between the texts of four contemporary East African writers living in the diaspora and writing in English. The writers are all migrants, Leila Aboulela and Jamal Mahjoub from the Sudan, now living in Scotland and Spain respectively and Abdulrazak Gurnah and Moyez G. Vassanji originally from Tanzania now residing in the UK and Canada respectively². What unifies the inquiry into these diverse narratives is the preoccupation of the authors with language and its operations in relation to both culture and identity. Rather than

¹ The idea of four African writers in conversation was inspired by Brenda Cooper's paper "The Changing Face of African Literature": Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me By My Rightful Name* and Buchi Emecheta's *The New Tribe* in Conversation" (unpublished Keynote Address: "The Changing Face of African Literature" March 21-23, 2006, in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, The Centre for African Literary Studies).

² I would like to acknowledge Prof. Brenda Cooper's manuscript *New African Fiction: Migration, Material Culture and Language*, which deals with these four authors among others. In the many discussions about the material, I have gained useful insights that have influenced my analysis beyond the obvious instances where I have referred to this work directly.

offering a comprehensive study of East African literature, this thesis reads particular narratives by these Anglophone writers to illuminate perspectives on translation and literary production. The chosen primary texts most powerfully demonstrate the relationship between migration, language and translation. As such they function as case studies for my theory. Moreover, all four authors are to some degree of Arab/Asian extraction and their writing exhibits ties to Islam: while Aboulela is a devout Muslim, Mahjoub, Gurnah and Vassanji engage with their Islamic roots from a more detached position. Although their life-stories and migration journeys differ, nevertheless there are enough points of contact in their texts to serve as starting points for such a conversation. I suggest that what holds this conversation together is the desire and the necessity for new relationships which cross cultural boundaries. As the opening quotation of this introduction indicates, Mahjoub defines cross-cultural literature as an avenue to open up “cracks of light” between people who would otherwise not come into contact with each other. His suggestive imagery of monochrome light changing into colour gives a visual representation of translation processes, in which lie the potential for change of perceptions, viewpoints and relationships.

As the thesis title *Translated People, Translated Texts* suggests, this conversation situates itself in the field of post-colonial translation studies. I will argue that these four novelists examine in their texts what it means to be a ‘translated person’, one who migrated from Africa to the West and thus occupies interstices of different cultures and languages and accesses different ways of knowing and representing the world. As a result of the authors’ cross-cultural positions, they produce ‘translated texts’, which through content and language aim to express the multiple worlds the characters have come to occupy: “Worlds exist by means of languages. The English language becomes a tool with which a ‘world’ can be textually constructed” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989: 44).

As my argument suggests, the definition of the term ‘translation’ in this thesis does not refer to its common usage of denoting solely the transferral of linguistic

units from one language into another, but links directly to the usage in the two related categories of the title, that is 'translated people' and 'translated texts'. Translation denotes here the multiple interactions of living and writing in an inter-cultural and inter-linguistic space. The term expresses the adaptations and processes people engage in when they assess their relationships to the culture and country of departure as well as the culture of their new place of residence. Bhabha speaks about the "newness of cultural translation" by referring to Rushdie, who identifies the impetus for "how newness enters the world" in "hotchpotch" and "melange" of peoples and cultures coming into contact with each other (Bhabha, 1994: 227; Gyssels & Hoving, 2001: 11). In terms of the novels, translation denotes the way in which the textual production constructs cultural difference and transports it into the fabric of the text. The dynamics between source cultures and languages and those of the host country are consciously incorporated into specific themes as well as linguistic techniques, which together emphasise the cross-cultural character of the text. In this thesis the term translation thus describes both a social phenomenon of people living in cultural translation, and the particular way of producing texts using language to signify this translated experience. All four authors, for example, use untranslated Arabic words in their mainly English texts. This usage of untranslated words interrupts and questions the privileged position of English as the "standard code" and powerfully asserts cultural difference (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989: 41). A conscious manipulation of English translates the quest for new relationships into the textual fabric of these novels and thus forces readers to occupy a position from which they participate in cultural translation as well.

Migration, in the work of many African writers, is the central "existential and epistemological condition from which spatial and temporal states of being and becoming" are examined (Zezeza, 2005). This applies to Aboulela, Mahjoub, Gurnah and Vassanji as well. Writing translated texts, the four authors themselves remember, recreate and re-translate their experiences of home and literary exile, while shedding light on an "exilic postcolonial condition" affecting,

according to Zeleza, “numerous African intellectuals”³ (Zeleza, 2005: 2). Experiences of exile differ for each of the authors and are determined by “enigmatic issues of personal temperament and disposition” as well as “nationality, race, class, gender, and ideology” (Zeleza, 2005: 14). Therefore the common threads are interwoven with the particular, idiosyncratic concerns of each author and each text to be discussed. While belonging to the comparatively privileged group of intellectual migrants, the authors are dedicated to a broader, and more representative view of migration in their fiction where they tell the stories of very different journeys to their own: of slaves and children, of sales people and pensioners, of students, widows and asylum seekers. In the chapters that follow, I will present four different angles on cultural translation that foreground the particular preoccupations each author brings to this conversation. We will see that these angles focus on different ways migration can be negotiated.

Migration is characterised by the movement from an often oppressive system that made the exodus necessary in the first place to a host environment, which instead of facilitating the building of a new home, rejects the migrant on racial or cultural grounds. As a result, the migrant is forever suspended between departure from the former home and arrival in the new host environment. Dealing with the sense of not belonging, of not fitting-in, the authors foreground particular strategies of cultural translation which enable their migrant characters, even if only tentatively and never completely, to find pockets of connection, of new relationships that provide some sense of acceptance and stability. The four angles are: translation of faith in chapter one, where Leila Aboulela’s texts are discussed; translation and the production of scholarly knowledge in Jamal Mahjoub’s novels in chapter two; translation and storytelling in chapter three on Abdulrazak Gurnah; and finally translation between the individual and old and new communities in Moyez G. Vassanji’s fiction in chapter four.

³ Zeleza in fact mentions Abdulrazak Gurnah and M.G. Vassanji in his list of ‘literary exiles from the [...] continent’ due to ‘destructive authoritarianism of postcolonial rule’ (Zeleza, 2005: 11).

A close analysis of Leila Aboulela's first novel *The Translator* (1999) and some of her short stories from *Coloured Lights* (2001) in chapter one will show that Aboulela's strategy of negotiating migration centres on the emphasis of the translatability of Islam into different contexts. Her migrants find solace in their faith, which helps them to cope with the unfamiliar and often unsympathetic environment in which they find themselves in Britain. Engaging with Svetlana Boym's definition of nostalgia, I will argue that nostalgia functions in two related ways in Abouela's texts: firstly, in foregrounding the left-behind home she is able to critique the Orientalism/Africanism of her Western environment and secondly, the nostalgic longing for the Sudan is related to the spiritual longing of her characters. Her fictional project thus promotes faith which she sets against the turmoil of migration.

In chapter two I will consider Mahjoub's novels *The Carrier* (1998) and *Wings of Dust* (1994). The analysis will centre on the way scholarly knowledge gets translated from one culture to another. This transmission of scholarly knowledge is a prerequisite of engaging meaningfully across cultural barriers. As the opening quote of this introduction shows, Mahjoub defines his task as a writer precisely in terms of bridging cultural gaps in order to broaden the vision of the reader. I chose the earlier novel *Wings of Dust* as the point of comparison with *The Carrier* rather than his most recent novels, *Travelling with Djinnns* and *Drift Latitudes*, because I want to highlight the development from a more negative view of cultural translation in the earlier novel to a marginally more positive appraisal of the possibilities of cultural translation and knowledge production in *The Carrier*. As the title of the novel indicates, there are carriers/translators who manage to transfer some of their knowledge into a radically different cultural context.

In chapter three an analysis of two novels by Abdulrazak Gurnah follows, dealing with the migrants' attempts to translate themselves into a different environment

but this time by means of narrative itself, by telling their stories. In *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *By the Sea* (2001) I will focus on the stories the migrants tell, arguing that in the earlier novel, the migrant character is caught mainly in storytelling as mimicry whereas in the latter text, the migrants engage in storytelling as cultural translation. When stories become vehicles of translation they afford the characters a sense of connection, of possible new relationships.

Vassanji's migrants struggle for individual autonomy vis-à-vis their positions as members of old and new communities. The analysis in chapter four will focus on the way communities both protect but also limit individual migrants. The novels *No New Land* (1991) and *Amriika* (1999) suggest that migrants fluctuate between affiliating themselves with the diaspora community of the ex-homeland and integrating in some ways into the host community and culture. This chapter will engage with the complex relationship between the individual and shifting communities.

In order to speak across cultures the authors use strategies of cultural translation within their texts thus drawing on the potential of language to write multiple worlds. Frantz Fanon points out that "to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means *above all* to assume a culture" (Fanon, 1986: 17-18, emphasis added). In the case of Aboulela, Mahjoub, Vassanji and Gurnah, this ability to speak across languages and cultures questions notions of authentic original culture and identity and underscores the continuous translation and negotiation of identity in the face of shifting linguistic, cultural and geographical boundaries.

Defining cultural translation

Why translation? Where different peoples come together – in friendship or in enmity, in dominance or in resistance – they construct their interactions and their images of each other to a large extent through discursive practices. In *the stories they tell of themselves and the others*, in their rituals of exchange, and in daily dealings, discourse is central to

constituting the boundary between groups and to regulating their relations. [...] Inevitably, when people and nations speak different languages, the discursive practices at the heart of their interactions must turn on translation. (Tymoczko, 1999: 15, emphasis added)

Even though the novels under discussion are written in English, a colonial heritage in the Sudan and Tanzania, the authors register cultural difference in their texts by manipulating English. Their novels thus bear the marks of translation. In its common contemporary sense, translation "is used to denote the process by which meanings are conveyed from one language to another" (Asad, 1995: 325). It has been argued convincingly that one cannot separate "linguistic matter" from the "modes of thought that are embodied in such matter" (Asad, 1986: 142). Translation between cultures therefore refers to "semiotic or, rather, hermeneutic issues rather than to purely linguistic problems" (Carbonell, 1996: 79). As Maria Tymoczko points out convincingly, translation "facilitates the growth of cultural contact and a movement to one world" but at the same time it is the "means by which difference is preserved, projected, and proscribed" (Tymoczko, 1999: 17). Thus the term translation is useful in the analysis of this literature, as the texts engage both in this "movement to one world" by using English in the first place but at the same time "preserving difference" by altering this English through content and linguistic devices.

How a culture is read and interpreted by another has to do with the discursive politics and "strategies of power", and the "mythology of stereotyping and representation" linking the respective societies (Carbonell, 1996: 80). The links between the Sudan, Tanzania and the West are steeped in colonial history and it is this heritage of colonial power that the writers engage with and contest. One way of engaging with the colonial power is to expose disabling stereotypes of the so-called African, Immigrant or Muslim in the Western society where the migrants try to construct their liminal identities. Through an altered language, dramatic irony and narrative development the writers critique Orientalist and Africanist discourses.

Setting the groundwork for the arguments that I make in this thesis, Edward Said's relevant study *Orientalism* (1978) has demonstrated the oppressive ideological premises and practises of the West to dominate the East. Following Said's trajectory, Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa* (1988) shows how Western discourses of Africa shape and "transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs" in order to justify colonisation (Mudimbe, 1988: 1). The migrants portrayed in the novels by Aboulela, Mahjoub, Vassanji and Gurnah are subjected to both Orientalist and Africanist discourses, doubly discriminated against as 'Muslim' and 'African'. Their presence in, and their view of, the host society counters Western stereotypes and their signifying power is destroyed. Therefore the narratives of the four writers examined attest to, but also transcend, such discourses of power as they rewrite their cultures, histories and their African identities.

The writers portray characters who are translated people because either voluntarily or by force they had to engage in the process of "learning to live another form of life and to speak another kind of language" within an institutional framework of the host society in the West (Asad, 1986: 149). The texts are cultural translations because they are material expressions of the individual process of learning to exist elsewhere and because they reflect the broader institutionalised relationships between and within the unequal societies in question. By forging a new language with which to express this cultural translation, the writers contest the hegemony of English and its colonial heritage and therefore question Western epistemology. In writing against and within what Mudimbe calls the "colonial library" (1994: 213), the writers, who can be compared to the contemporary artists Mudimbe discusses in *The Idea of Africa*, assert an African knowledge production that is of "two traditions, two worlds, both of which they challenge" (Mudimbe, 1994: 164). What Mudimbe argues and what is relevant to this discussion, is that a conjunction happens: "space, time, and human tradition interrelate" (Mudimbe, 1994: 171). This thesis purports that this

interrelation happens in unpredictable and exciting ways in the texts of Aboulela, Mahjoub, Vassanji and Gurnah.

It is through processes of translation that the authors create the rare instances in their novels where new relationships between characters from different backgrounds become possible, because they are not solely defined by the stratification of power of the societies in which they live. The authors demonstrate through these instances where communication happens across seemingly unbridgeable boundaries that people might be more resourceful and embracing of diversity than society at large seems to expect.

In the reading process of these translated texts newness is the result of “making the linkages through the unstable elements of literature and life [...] rather than arriving at ready-made names” (Bhabha, 1994: 227). The writers thus engage creatively with issues of intercultural practices due to globalisation and migration. The reader becomes a translator and is translated at the same time. This suggests that cultural translation is both an aesthetic and a political project. This new literature, in its search to express complex conditions of writing from an interstitial position, invites the reader to participate in the linkages of literature and life and thus perhaps to translate the aesthetic of a reading experience into a different way to view the world.

The idea that postcolonial migrant writers engage in cultural production that can be linked to translation processes has to do with the fact that the writers inscribe into their text how difference and otherness are to be read. They show how the characters translate their foreign environment into a familiar frame of reference, and how from their perspective the people of the host country in turn translate the stranger, who has arrived in their midst. Thus “translation is not only the appropriation of previously existing texts” but also the “materialization of our relationship to otherness” (Simon, 1992: 161). Seeing that “any cultural discourse may be said to constitute a text” one can speak of cultural translation whenever

“an alien experience is internalized and rewritten in the culture where that experience is received” (Carbonell, 1996: 81). This works in two ways in the texts to be discussed. Firstly, there is the migrant through whose eyes an alien Western culture is scrutinised and translated and secondly, the migrant measures this experience against the familiar experiences of the home culture.

Translation processes are therefore continuous dialogic interactions between the migrants and their different environments. They are “a way of figuring the relations between cultures, in particular the encounter with alterity, the mechanisms of imperialism, and the special conditions of the postmodern, globalised world” (Tymoczko, 1999: 16). In literary studies this intercultural exchange is “fundamental” in that “more and more of what is read is literature-in-translation” and “more and more literature is produced in an international context” (Tymoczko, 1999: 16). The four writers examined offer a case in point, as does Salman Rushdie’s literary “family tree”, which is an expression of cultural translation:

We are inescapably international writers at a time when the novel has never been a more international form [...]; and it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents. My own – selected half consciously, half not – include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melvill, Machado de Assis; a polyglott family tree. (Rushdie quoted in Tymoczko, 1999: 16)

In the introduction to his book *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Salman Rushdie describes his displacement as an Indian writer living in Britain, trying to recall his homeland in order to write his novel, *Midnight's Children*. His conceptualisation of writers, who have been exiled or who have emigrated from Africa to Europe or the U.S. as translated people, provided my initial interest in this body of contemporary African literature that deals specifically with migration(s) across cultures. Rushdie’s notion of having been borne across resonates with the biographies and fictional works of the four authors considered here. Their lives and work challenge simple constructions of what constitutes an African text or an

African writer – they are translated people and their work traverses different cultural contexts, religions and languages.

Writers who have experienced the discontinuity of being in a present that is elsewhere from the past, particularly when this “out-of-country” also means writing in a different language, often feel the “urge to reclaim, to look back” to the homeland (Rushdie, 1991: 10). Rushdie goes on to explain that the physical alienation experienced results inevitably in fragmented memory, because the totality cannot be recalled. As a result, writers create “not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands” (Rushdie, 1991: 10).

The imaginary, fragmented and partial nature of such memory of places and the past is not just a mirror of nostalgia, though it is that too, but also a realistic acknowledgement that as human beings our vision is necessarily incomplete, that we see through “cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions” (Rushdie, 1991: 12). The writers discussed in this thesis translate fragments of an African past into the present, where these fragments combine with recent experiences in the West. These memory pieces become the kaleidoscopic “cracked lenses” of translated literature, offering the reader glimpses into multiple worlds. The ambivalence inherent in migration has to do with this partial vision. The migrant loses the actual experience of the homeland, but gains a perspective of what it is like not to be home, to look at ‘home’ with detachment and to question its underlying assumptions. Exiles traverse borders and “break barriers of thought and experience” (Said, 1994a: 147). In discussing Said’s writing on exile, Zeleza points out that “seeing the entire world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision” (Zeleza, 2005: 9).

The distance from the culture of departure offers these writers the possibility to gain new perspectives as they are outside one particularised social position. In their dislocation they occupy a space of liminality. Said emphasises this in his essay ‘On Exile’ where he says that

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware at least of two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*. (Said, 1994a: 148, emphasis in original)

Cultural displacement thus might force the exiled or emigrated writer to accept the often ambiguous and shifting ground of an identity that is at once “plural and partial” (Rushdie, 1991: 15). Commenting on this ambiguity of a fragmented but at the same time multiple vision, Rushdie remarks that “sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (Rushdie, 1991: 15). The experience of displacement, even though sometimes painful⁴, does provide writers new angles with which to think about culture, the past and the present in their fiction and the notion of being engaged in a translatory process can shed light on the particular migrant literature I will be examining.

The Manipulation of Language

Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. (Rushdie, 1991: 17)

As the quotation indicates, Rushdie situates cultural translation squarely in the realm of language. Cultural translation requires the writers to think about their often ambivalent affiliations with a colonial language that positions them as outsiders of a dominant culture. English, as one of Gurnah's characters puts it, is “a language which barks and scorns [...] behind every third corner” (Gurnah,

⁴ Said stresses that one cannot underestimate the pain of exile: ‘It is the unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement.’ (Said, 1994: 137)

1996: 73). But like Rushdie, these writers had their primary and secondary schooling under British colonial rule and their tertiary education in the West in English as well. According to Mudimbe, the two sociological reasons for the genesis of African literature in European languages are colonisation and a Western system of schooling (Mudimbe, 1994: 179). This means that English is a likely choice for the four authors under discussion, and as Rushdie points out, might also be a political one:

To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. But the British Indian Writer simply does not have the option of rejecting English anyway. [...] It must, in spite of everything, be embraced. (The word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. *Having been borne across the world, we are translated men* (!). It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.) (Rushdie, 1991: 17)

Leila Aboulela provides an example of how the politics of language intersect with cultural translation. She started writing in 1992 as a reaction against the Gulf War and the anti-Arab and anti-Islam representations in the media (Eissa, 2005: 1). Her writing project thus translates the stereotypes of Western media into a fiction where Islam is a positive and nurturing aspect of people's lives. That such a translation project is written in English makes sense, because its intended audience is twofold: it is challenging stereotypes of a Western readership as well as encouraging "ordinary Muslims trying to practice in difficult circumstances and in a society which is unsympathetic to religion" (Eissa, 2005: 1). Aboulela's aim thus links directly to Rushdie's idea of language as a useful tool of charting difference. Decolonisation happens in the realm of words and language and Vassanji makes a similar point when he contends that he uses English to alter the tradition of Western writing by making his own experience part of what is written in the Western canon (Kanaganayakam, 1991: 24).

The politics of language are indeed at the heart of colonial rule as language becomes, often in conjunction with violence, the "medium through which a

hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989: 7). Africans speak European languages as a result of an imperialist project of domination. Johannes Fabian’s study of colonial administration in East Africa, *Language and Colonial Power* (1986), as well as Gauri Viswanathan’s introduction to her book *Masks of Conquests* (1989) describe the symbiotic relationship between discursive and material practices of colonialism operating simultaneously.

One of the etymological meanings of the word ‘translate’ was ‘conquer’ pointing to the importance of language in colonial attempts to “classify, record, represent and process non-European societies” (Loomba, 1998: 101). It is now recognised that colonialism and translation went hand in hand (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999: 3). It is perhaps not surprising that postcolonial literatures as well as minority writers in first world metropolises challenge and “redefine many accepted notions in translation theory which continue to be debated and elaborated within the longstanding traditions of western ‘humanism’ and ‘universalism’” (Mehrez, 1992: 121). If Europe set itself up as the great Original and the colony became the lesser translation, postcolonial theory is bound to reassess that relationship and the very meaning of translation itself (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999: 5). Manipulating language to express an African migrant’s worldview is thus a crucial part of this reassessment. Vassanji is quite explicit about shaping a new language in order to address racism and prejudice:

I have a much more aggressive view towards language; if we were invaded, then I now see myself as part of an invading force, or part of an invading culture from the Third World which is now helping to transform the cultures that invaded us. So what I do is use the language, but change it and add on to the literary traditions here. What I attempt is to bridge different literary traditions. (Kanaganayakam 1991: 24)

Thus the English language becomes a tool for the migrant writer to express the interstices of cultures through an heteroglossic and visibly changed linguistic medium. The writers of *The Empire Writes Back* distinguish between English,

“the language of the erstwhile imperial centre” and english in the lower case “which has been transformed and subverted by different communities in the post-colonial world” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989: 8). I argue that their distinction is based on the perception that English is a homogeneous entity, a perception Bhaktin has challenged convincingly. For him, as Clifford argues, “a language is a diverging, contesting, dialoguing set of discourses that no ‘native’ – let alone visitor – can ever control. And this does not even broach the question of multilingual/intercultural situations” (Clifford, 1997: 22). It is for this reason I have refrained from using the lower case here. Also the writers write within and against Western discursive hegemony. Using the lower case implies a neat separation of Western versus African thought.

This discursive challenge happens, for example, by incorporating untranslated words from another language and all four writers use this strategy of *Verfremdung*⁵. Through an altered language removed from familiarity, they express their interstitial position of bringing together multiple locales, languages, traditions and histories. Vassanji explains this strategy:

With all English writing, instead of moulding oneself to current practice, one tries to change [it] to suit one's objective. But that had to be done in a subtle way, in a way that the reader accepts. When you introduce new words you have to decide whether to introduce them as foreign words or as words that will mean something to the reader if put in italics. The same goes for introducing concepts that are unfamiliar. (Kanaganayakam 1991:24)

Unfamiliar concepts and foreign words within the English text subtly educate the reader. The role of Islam in some of the novels under discussion is crucial in this regard, as is the use of Arabic in the English text. Western readers are likely to find their general knowledge inadequate for a full understanding of the text and

⁵ *Verfremdung* is the German for ‘making strange’ or ‘defamiliarising’. It is a term coined by Bertold Brecht’s epic theatre. He wanted to break down the identification process between the audience and the plot on the stage, in order to force the spectators to critical and analytic viewing and thus to facilitate a debate about what was assumed to be ‘familiar’ and ‘natural’ and ‘right’ (von Wilpert, 1989: 993-4, my translation).

thus their ethnocentric assumptions are laid bare. And even the English text itself is transformed by different influences to express each author's particular vision and affiliations.

In his introduction to *New Essays on African Literature* Gurnah points out, contra Ngugi's language position, that in Okri's English writing, he "challenge[s] the imperialist narrative, [and] subvert[s] and resists Europe's misrepresenting discourse" (Gurnah, 1993a: ix). This is achieved by the mixture of a "complex understanding of the novel form in English" and other "narrative forms [...], which derive from Yoruba oral narrative" (Gurnah, 1993a: ix). Thus the English novel form is used to express cultural assumptions of the narrative that are not exclusively English (Lewis, 1999: 224-5).

For the postcolonial writer to conquer English is precisely to re-translate structures of domination and oppression of the language into new modes of creation, mechanisms for engendering new meanings and forms. Rushdie's term of being translated thus both invokes the practices of domination by colonial ways of seeing but also the possibility of re-inscribing the term with a politics of resistance, an attempt at undoing the effects of earlier translations:

The rethinking of translation becomes an important task in a context where it has been used since the European Enlightenment to underwrite practices of subjectification, especially for colonized peoples. Such a rethinking – a task of great urgency for a post-colonial theory attempting to make sense of 'subjects' already living 'in translation', imagined and re-imagined by colonial ways of seeing – seeks to reclaim the notion of translation by deconstructing it and reinscribing its potential as a strategy of resistance. (Niranjana, 1992: 6)

This view of translation presupposes the awareness that a location is not just a fixed entity but a "series of encounters and translations" (Clifford, 1997: 11). To this Bhabha remarks that "we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the

burden of the meaning of culture” (Bhabha, 1994: 38). What he means here is that in this in-between space it is possible to “elude the politics of polarity” of Orientalist and Africanist discourses, which lose their explanatory power by oversimplification. Thus we may open “the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*”⁶ (Bhabha, 1994: 38, italics in original). Interestingly, there is also an Arabic term, *al-mukhlit*, to characterise the writing expressing a syncretic in-between consciousness, which contributes to the discussion of crises of allegiance and of the formation of transcultural identity (Johnson, 1991: 239-260). I will come back to this term, when I discuss the role of Islam in the fiction of the four writers later in this introduction.

At this point it suffices to note that *al-mukhlit* echoes Glissant’s idea of new relationships becoming possible in this interstitial space, because the Other is not swallowed up by universalist transcendence (Gyssels & Hoving, 2001: 11). Bhabha makes a similar connection between the articulation of culture and the movement of journeys and translations, when he states that “culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and *translational*” (Bhabha, 1994: 172, emphasis added). The term transnational invokes the specific histories of cultural displacement and thus speaks of the journeys that economic and political refugees and expatriates have to take.

Bhabha continues the argument, stating that “culture is *translational* because such spatial histories of displacement make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, a rather complex issue” (Bhabha, 1994: 172, emphasis added). Bhabha’s insight here is that migrants are actively engaged in

⁶ The concept of hybridity has been criticised for its potential to homogenise difference by privileging the experience of cosmopolitan intellectuals and thus neglecting the reality of exploitative socio-political relationships (Werbner & Modood, 1997: 15). Moreover, its validity as a subversive concept has been questioned owing to its over-usage and commodification in the media (Griem, 1998: 221). Despite these valid criticisms I maintain that the concept is useful to signify the continual and contingent process of cultural interaction in concrete, particular contexts.

the process of culture production. Their work traverses national and colonial divides and thus shows that questions of identity, agency and affiliation are negotiated mutually across such boundaries. All novels discussed explore this complex relationship across cultures between the locals and the migrants, whose presence in the metropolis speaks of the “history that happened elsewhere” (Bhabha, 1994: 168-9).

This thesis demonstrates that the four writers discussed here have in varied ways reclaimed translation as a tool of resistance, laying bare colonial and neo-colonial ways of seeing/translating and asserting their own perspectives as valid re-translations of structures of inequality. And as Niranjana contends in the previous quotation, this strategy of translation results from circumstances in which people are already living in translation. These re-translations are not always successful in resisting structures of inequality and Tymoczko has pointed out that “one of the most significant phenomena to be charted is the dialectic between subordination and resistance that often occurs within a single translation” (Tymoczko, 1999: 27). Subordination and resistance are the two poles between which the migrants move in their hope to create a home away from home.

A central aspect of this re-translation in the fiction of Aboulela, Mahjoub, Vassanji and Gurnah is their attempt to carve out a place for the migrant that is not set by a dominating authority but can be recognised as a safe and valued locale. In their fiction, the migrants are caught between trying to set a place for themselves and a placelessness that assails them from a hostile environment. This movement starts already in some of the texts in Africa, where exile is the result of placelessness. Baker argues that

For place to be recognised by one as actually PLACE, as a personally valued locale, one must set and maintain the boundaries. If one, however, is constituted and maintained by and within boundaries set by a dominating authority, then one is not a setter of place. (Baker in Olausson 1997: 15)

Olausson uses this definition of place to highlight Bessie Head's lifelong project of becoming a "setter of place" in fiction and in life. One of the points she makes about Head's work resonates with the fiction discussed here; the novels focus both on "the process of finding a point of exit from an oppressive system" and "a situation where the protagonist needs a point of entrance into any system at all in order to have an existence" (Olausson, 1997: 16). For Aboulela's protagonists, the community of believers in the host country becomes a point of entrance and a safe place. In Mahjoub's work, science and scholarly knowledge enable the characters to find points of entry that lead to real friendships which cross cultural boundaries. Gurnah creates characters who seem more preoccupied with finding points of exit given that they have grown weary of seeking place. Even in his fiction however, we find the tentative reaching for connection and points of entry. Vassanji's novels concentrate on the protagonists' forming of new affiliations in the host country which have the potential of becoming points of entry. The interaction of living and writing in the "contact zone", a figure of contestatory expression coined by Pratt, is consciously invoked by the four writers to draw attention to the significance of occupying places over which one has little control (Pratt, 1992: 4). The following section will consider how the writers problematise notions of place in their work and how their life-stories provide the backdrop for these thematic concerns with contact zones, homes and destinations.

Contact zones, homes and destinations

On the one hand, we are living more and more closely with different cultures, we are rubbing against different people on a day to day basis – we cannot afford to be insular. Barriers are breaking down continuously and prejudices are challenged. On the other hand, because of greater diversity and greater choice, some people will take the option of not mixing. Fifty or so years ago the issue was an issue of *race*, now we have gone [...] deeper into differences in values, different ways of thinking and beliefs, which are collectively referred to as *culture*. (Aboulela in Eissa 2005: 2, emphasis in original)

Aboulela perceptively explains here the conflicting movement between cross cultural communication and mixing on the one hand and the refusal to break down barriers on the other. This movement is found in all the texts discussed in this thesis. The stories of migration from Africa to the West make for complex hybrid cultural and linguistic spaces. The body of work expresses these clashes as often highly intricate negotiations within and across cultural boundaries in the quest for a migrant identity. The writers discussed here are not only exiled by the colonial history of their home countries, but in the case of Gurnah and Vassanji, they are exiled by the independent African state. In this way, Gurnah and Vassanji are doubly situated at the crossroads of cultures, for their 'Africanness' is a contested category. Of the four writers, Gurnah and Vassanji are exiles in the narrow definition of the word as describing

people who are prevented, against their own commitment and desire, from living in the country of their birth by the authority of state – any state – or by fear of personal annihilation. In other words, I mean not privilege but impossibility, not profession but pain. (Ahmad in Olausson 1997: 35)

In contrast to Gurnah and Vassanji's exile, the migration journeys of Aboulela and Mahjoub are more the result of professional and familial reasons. They nonetheless engage in this 'reinvention of a new community'. Jamal Mahjoub, of British and Sudanese parentage, struggles to anchor himself in a place as a result of this mixed heritage. This is most evident in the protagonist of *Travelling with Djinnns* (2003), who is of similar background, and who admits that

I sometimes think I envy those people who know where they belong; writers who have a language and a history that is granted to them with no catches. [...] Of course, I enjoy no such privilege. I belong to that nomad tribe, the great unwashed, those *people born in the joins between* continental shelves. (Mahjoub, 2003: 4, emphasis added)

Mahjoub's fiction therefore also moves between placelessness and place. Aboulela's case is slightly different, as she left the Sudan to study in Britain and to accompany her husband. Her relationship to her country of origin is therefore

less troubled than for the other writers discussed here. She misses her home where she feels genuine belonging, and thus feels at times assailed by placelessness in Britain. Despite their different backgrounds all four writers are caught precisely in-between these two positions. The movement from placelessness to place is never completed and thus constantly requires cultural translation, where points of exits and points of entries are negotiated again and again.

The narratives of these four writers thus become sites of negotiation, of contact zones, where “the making and remaking of identities, takes place along the policed and transgressive intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples, locales” (Clifford, 1997: 7). As a consequence, their plurilingual and pluricultural texts invite the reader to engage in translation processes as well.

These texts resist the monolingual demand of their readers to be like themselves: ‘in-between,’ capable of reading and translating simultaneously (Mehrez, 1992: 122). This demand on the reader is important, because whereas the translations within the narratives of the novels offer only very limited and often fraught communication across cultures, the main political aim of cultural translation in this kind of literature happens in the space between the text and the reader. The reader, in participating vicariously in the translations from placelessness to place and vice versa, cannot but engage with the cultural contact zones of the texts. Vassanji calls this process of making readers familiar with something they had not known before a “way of broadening the substrata” (Kanaganayakam, 1991: 24). He gives the following example: “There is Dar es Salaam, a place no one has heard of, except the immigration authorities. And then suddenly you find people discussing Dar while discussing my novel” (Kanaganayakam, 1991: 24). Substrata seems to denote in this instance the pool of general knowledge of the readers. This broadening of knowledge attests to the very deliberate attempt of this literature to draw the reader into a new relationship, where the Other is allowed to become a setter of place.

The fictional migrants, as the authors point out again and again, cannot just 'be' settlers of place as their identity is reduced by the host country's perception of their 'looks'. Abdulrazak Gurnah, in an interview, reveals how this affects him as well:

I never forget how I look. I have never quite lost my awkwardness about how I would appear to others. I don't look at other people and forget how unlike them I look. Which strangely enough I never felt when I first came here. I would be walking and when I caught sight of myself in a shop window, I would be shocked at my own reflection. "Who the hell is that?" (Nair, 2005: 3)

The migrant's identity is reduced by the host country's perception of their skin colour, which inserts them firmly into the discourse of Orientalism and the perceptions of 'Arabs' (which they are not, because they are brown Africans, of either Asian or Arab descent) and 'Islam'. Here it suffices to point out that a substantial challenge of cultural translation also has to do with the "almost total absence of any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately to discuss the Arabs or Islam" (Said, 1978: 27). All four writers come from backgrounds where Islam plays an important role and whether or not they themselves are believers, their translations are set against Western representations and stereotypes of Islam. Accordingly, these writers aim to fulfil what Said identifies as a most important task of providing contemporary alternative perspectives that differ from a dominant Western view (Said, 1978: 24).

Aboulela, Mahjoub, Gurnah and Vassanji translate migrant identities into a space that is not solely defined by the racialised discourse that constructs "people of African descent and Asian descent, [...], as being *outside*" of the white Euro-American West (Brah, 1996: 9). Therefore the texts assert the possibility for migrants to create homes away from home. While the host country uses a reductive understanding of home as being in or of a particular nation in order to

marginalise the migrants, the authors set the often tentative discourse of home as a narrative of everyday lived experience. This lived experience captures both locality and movement. Home here “connotes networks of family, kin, friends and colleagues” and becomes a space where “feelings of rootedness ensue from the mundane and the unexpected of daily practice” (Brah, 1996: 4). Home is to be found in practices rather than in a particular locality.

These practices include “a repetition of habitual interactions, in styles of dress and address, in *memories and myths, in stories carried around in one’s head*” (Dawson, 1998: 7, emphasis added). The four authors thus write narratives of home and movement: the stories and memories in the texts speak of the longing to salvage home as a bounded, coherent locality, as well as the more mobile conception, where home becomes relational in the practises of social interaction.

Gurnah’s characters only come close to home in their storytelling, in stories carried around in their heads, because their reality in Britain makes it almost impossible to build up a social network. Vassanji’s migrants, on the other hand, find themselves in a close knit diaspora community in Toronto, which reproduces home to a certain extent. The challenge for these migrants is to widen these social networks to create a home which provides agency to the individual and extends to include people of the host country. Mahjoub’s characters struggle against homelessness and the feeling of abandonment, which is similar for Gurnah’s migrants, who find home only in their storytelling. In Mahjoub’s novels the creation of communities of learning and the translation of scholarly knowledge offers a home in an unstable social environment. Aboulela’s migrants find home in rituals of Muslim faith, like praying five times a day, a practice which adds structure to the chaos of migration. Home for most of Aboulela’s characters lies in their religious identity and the social networks of friends and acquaintances met at Mosque. For Aboulela herself, a personal religious identity provides the stability of home rather than national identity: “I can carry [religion]

with me wherever I go, whereas the other things can easily be taken away from me” (Sethi, 2005: 1).

However, all the texts show that most of the migrants struggle to build up these social networks, which would afford them a sense of belonging. This has to do with the asymmetrical intercultural processes of translation between the place of departure and the place of arrival, the destination, which forever suspends the migrant in a movement to and fro: between place and placelessness, between home and homelessness. Papastergiadis argues in his book on migration that the process of departure and arrival are never complete:

To use the metaphor of the journey, a translation never arrives at its destined port, it is forever conscious of its place of departure and unable to rest in any abstraction of its own destination. Never quite there, the translation continues to reinscribe itself in the process of journeying. *These temporary reinscriptions which are formed in the contestation between departure and arrival, are the signs with which diasporic communities enunciate themselves.* (Papastergiadis, 2000: 139, emphasis added)

Thus the question when or whether a place of residence becomes home or whether home remains the place that is left behind, depends largely on the kind of cultural translation the migrants engage in and this is dealt with differently in each of the texts. This question will return throughout the thesis. Suffice to say here that ‘home’ appears as a central symbol with polysemic content in a variety of contexts in this intercultural literature, constantly threatened by ‘homelessness’.

For example, when Gurnah is asked about Zanzibar and if it feels like home even after almost four decades in Britain, he replies that “I don’t feel British. As for, where I come from, Zanzibar, Africa, I think about it every day, several times a day. Places don’t just live where they are, they live within you” (Nair, 2005: 3). As head of the English department at Kent, Gurnah has translated himself successfully into a British environment, but the above statement makes it clear

that the sense of displacement from the country of origin stays with migrants. Writing is a way to remember, recreate and return to the country of youth, as evidenced in all of the texts discussed in this thesis.

Mahjoub, as the child of a Sudanese father and an English mother fictionalises this 'double' origin in Yasin, the protagonist of *Travelling with Djinnns*, who complains that "I don't have an Africa to run away to when my life turns sour. Europe is my dark continent, and I am searching for the heart of it" (Mahjoub, 2003: 59). In the two novels by Mahjoub that will be discussed, the characters do come from Africa, but they also are exiled to a position of no return, which is similar to that of Yasin's double origin. Vassanji, when asked if he regarded Canada his home, replies: "This is an open society and you can make it your own home. But you are right in that it can never be a complete home. I still come from elsewhere" (Kanaganayakam, 1991: 27). These examples highlight that the question of home and place is bound up with dislocation and ambivalence, which is translated into their texts as well. The cultural translations within the texts then result from a position of being in-between and living in an in-complete home.

Given this situation, it is perhaps not surprising that critics seem to find it difficult to place these writers and their work in a particular literary canon. Rosemary George, for example, argues for Vassanji's novels that they belong to a separate category of "immigrant literature" which, rather than writing the nation from its ambivalent margins "unwrites nation and national projects because they flagrantly display a rejection of one national space for another more desirable location" (George in Lewis 1999: 217). She claims that in Vassanji's fiction there are often only "generations of wanderers" and it seems as if their "doubly diasporic identity has more to do with a shared sense of homelessness than with a shared sense of home" (George in Lewis 1999: 217). This description could well be applied to Mahjoub, who, because of his English-Sudanese parentage, seems to concentrate in his fiction on wanderers. However, he is not an immigrant, as his British passport allows his free movement across Europe.

Aboulela could be categorised as an immigrant writer (both her novels are set in Europe and Africa). But her very sincere attachment to Islam and its expression she encountered in her youth in Khartoum connect her texts to North Africa. None of the four writers discussed here sever the ties that bind them to their African youth and the term immigrant literature of Rosemary George's sense as an expression of homelessness does provide explanatory value.

Gurnah, rather than inventing a new term like George, seeks to broaden the definition of African literature. In his capacity as editor of the two Heinemann volumes of *Essays on African Writing, 2 vols* (1993) he argues for a definition of African Literature to include writers of Arab, Indian, and European ethnic origin: "If African writing was neglectful of women, its commentators were also neglectful of its racisms – evident in the exclusions of South African and North African writers from 'African literature'" (Gurnah, 1993b: xii). Gurnah remarks that the inclusion of essays on Assia Djebar and Jelloun from Algeria and Morocco respectively serve to "bring them more prominently to the attention of readers of African writing" (Gurnah, 1993b: vi). Their writing is relatively unknown in discussion on African literature due to the "implicit sub-heading for 'African literature' as writing from south of the Sahara, though their relative neglect is also just as much to do with the ambivalent cultural affiliations of North African societies" (Gurnah, 1993b: vi). What Gurnah so aptly points out is the fact that 'African' itself is a term existing in the realm of inter-cultural and inter-linguistic space. What becomes clear is that the authors grapple with race and citizenship even before they leave Africa, because they do not want to define Africanness in racial terms but rather in relation to place of birth, culture and upbringing. Movement and mixing already happens on the continent, before people migrate to the West and doubly so after their migration.

Zeleza points out that "it is no exaggeration to say that there is hardly any African writer of note who has not experienced exile at one time or another" and he refers to the compendium of *Literary Exile in the Twentieth Century*, which

among many others, lists sixty-five African authors from all over the continent (Zezeza, 2005: 11). In most cases mentioned by Zezeza there would be no question that these writers are African, authenticating Gurnah's assessment of the situation. The reason for African authors not being seen as 'African' hinges on a narrow understanding of ethnic origins. This narrow understanding of origins coupled with what Zezeza terms the "destructive authoritarianisms of postcolonial rule" is precisely what Gurnah experienced himself and this gives weight to his plea for a more inclusive definition of African literature (Zezeza, 2005).

Vassanji's and Gurnah's alienation from the post-independence Tanzania and Zanzibar centres on their Asian/Arab-Zanzibari heritage, which is not African enough for a postcolonial nation after independence. May Joseph in her study *Nomadic Identities* (1999) points out that

During the early 70s, the bourgeois nationalisms that fueled optimistic economic policies in many postcolonial states also provoked intense debates on the meaning of citizenship. Nationalist aspirations forged new notions of a public collective, in the process marking out new categories of noncitizen and stranger within the state. (Joseph, 1999: 6)

East African Asians thus fell into this new category of noncitizen in Tanzania, resulting in a series of coerced mass migrations, which were enforced overnight (Joseph, 1999: 6). Vassanji's and Gurnah's position of marginality at 'home' thus contributes to their migration into the metropolis. Their identity is described as doubly diasporic, having affiliations not only with East Africa but also with India and Arab-Zanzibar. Their writing draws from, and describes, the "forgotten history of those [outsiders] who came [to Africa], as traders or indentured labourers, tried to find a place of their own through various political changes, and finally, in many cases, had to emigrate like their forefathers, leaving the shores of the Indian Ocean after more than a century" (Bardolph, 1998: 78). Migration is a central socio-political phenomenon in this region consisting of "sites of worldly travel: difficult encounters and occasions for dialogue" (Clifford, 1997: 12).

Clifford's notion that 'home' itself is a site of travel and movement rather than one of stasis comes to mind here (Clifford, 1997: 1).

Countries of Origin

Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, both strategic ports, have for centuries controlled trade routes from the continental interior to the markets of Arabia, India and other ports of the Indian Ocean maritime and colonial world; thus they have a long tradition of cross cultural mixing and trade (Spaulding, 1991; Lewis, 1999). In the early Islamic centuries (600-1500 AD) Egypt and the other north-eastern provinces of Rome fell to the initial wave of Arab conquest and the trade routes between the Graeco-Roman rulers and East African coastal regions were taken over by Arab rulers, who used the established trade customs and founded settlements at important trade centres (Spaulding, 1991: 26).

Likewise Sudan, which was a collection of small independent kingdoms in the seventh century, became attractive to Arab miners due to the discovery of gold (Holt, 1979: 16). In addition to royal trade, Muslim private traders were admitted to commercial enclaves along the east African coast and coastal Islands (like Zanzibar). This was a commercially beneficial but very limited contact between Muslim traders and African tribes.

When the northeast African kingdoms declined, Christianity was abandoned and Islam became the main religion in these regions: "Islam was to be the religion of the sultanates of Dar Fur in the western Sudan and Wadai in eastern Chad, and of the sultanate of Adal located south and east of Christian Ethiopia" (Spaulding, 1991: 28). Spaulding points out that the early Islamic centuries brought prosperity to the commercial settlements along the eastern coast and the trade continued to spread further south so that by 1500 "the long chain of settlements extended from Sawakin on the Red Sea coast to Sofala at the head of the Mozambique Channel" (Spaulding, 1991: 28). All these communities shared the allegiance to

Islam and thus similar principles in the conduct of politics, economy and cultural life. Linguistically they were quite diverse though: Arabic was spoken in the northern regions, Somali along the Somali coast and Swahili further south (Spaulding, 1991: 28).

These communities occupied an in-between position, mediating between the wider Indian Ocean maritime world and the inland African peoples, as well as vying with rival ports north and south for dominance and importance in order to monopolise their trade position (Spaulding, 1991: 29). This historical mixing already suggests that the origins of the four writers are sites of translation. In an interview, Gurnah stresses that mercantile cultures rely on translation for daily communication. In the same interview he points out that one of the aims of his novel *Paradise* is to show “the number of people who don’t understand each other’s language and the number of times these exchanges have to be translated between different groups of people” (Nair, 2005: 1). In the development of mercantile centres, these early Islamic city-states bore significant resemblance in the social structure and political style to their Mediterranean counterparts, organised in patriarchal lineage groups that were hierarchically structured according to their place within the economy, the wealthy merchants being the most important group (Spaulding, 1991: 29).

When the Portuguese arrived in the Indian Ocean (the Portuguese period in East Africa roughly spans from 1499 to 1698), they “took advantage of the fact that Arabs traditionally fought with each other in a very ritualised fashion” thus they were easily beaten by European warfare (www.allaboutzanzibar.com, 15/08/2005). After this two hundred year Christian interlude, the second Islamic period from 1698 to 1890 re-established old trade patterns and city-states. Fierce conflict for dominance over coastal regions and the African inland and the beginning of a lucrative slave and gold trade led to the disintegration of African kingdoms and the formation of military-based settlements (Spaulding, 1991: 31). Of major historical importance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was

the rise of a new Islamic leadership in East Africa. This was based on a mystical stream, Sufism, and centred on holy men, who reorganised societies into Islamic brotherhoods.

These brotherhoods formed a “viable alternative to the established institutional arrangements of older communities, whether kingdoms, city-states, or small-scale societies” often incorporating outsiders of such older communities (Spaulding, 1991: 32). For example, in the Sudan in 1881, a religious Islamic leader, Muhammad ibn Abdalla, proclaimed himself the Mahdi (‘the expected one’) to unify the tribes in western and central Sudan. Mahjoub's novel *In the Hour of Signs* tells the story of the Mahdi. Taking advantage of the conditions resulting from Ottoman-Egyptian maladministration, his religious nationalist revolt led to the fall of Khartoum in 1885, which he held for fourteen years to be defeated by the Anglo-Egyptian force under Lord Kitchener in 1899 (Holt, 1979: 87-117).

On Zanzibar, Sultan Said from Oman consolidated the clove and the slave trade and the island became very rich, its powers only diminishing after the Sultan's death and the take-over by the British in 1890 (www.allaboutzanzibar.com, 15/08/2005). In the nineteenth century, at the height of European expansion and imperialism, Islamic monarchies of Egypt and Oman fought against European dominance in East Africa, ultimately losing against the British (in the case of Tanzania and Zanzibar), who controlled both until the 1960s when independence was declared.

Independence, revolution and the expulsion of East Africans of Indian/Arabic descent in Uganda under Idi Amin caused fear and a general restlessness in Tanzania and on Zanzibar, which resulted in the migration of whole communities. In Tanzania, the British handed over to Julius Nyerere, who tried to limit the influence of “false citizens” in the newly independent African nation (Brah, 1996: 1). On Zanzibar, the British handed the government back to the Sultan at

independence in 1963. This was followed by a coup and a bloody revolution, “installing Sheik Abeid Amani Karume as President – the first African leader in Zanzibar for at least 500 years” (www.allaboutzanzibar.com, 15/08/2005). Indian and Arab people fled for their lives and livelihoods as their property was confiscated by the state both in Tanzania and on Zanzibar, whose political union was declared in April 1964 (Joseph, 1999: 2-3; Lewis, 1999: 217). Gurnah recalls the consequences of the revolt on Zanzibar:

I arrived in Britain, although I wasn't Asian. I came from Zanzibar, which in 1964 had seen a violent uprising that led to catastrophic upheaval. Thousands were slaughtered, whole communities were expelled and many hundreds imprisoned. In the shambles and persecutions that followed, a vindictive terror ruled our lives. (Anonymous, 2001a: 2)

In this exodus, both authors left Tanzania as young men to study abroad: Gurnah departed to England by plane with his brother in 1969 and Vassanji migrated from Dar es Salaam on a scholarship to study at MIT in Boston in the 70s. Gurnah now teaches at the University of Kent at Canterbury and Vassanji lives and writes in Toronto, Canada.

In the Sudan, independence was declared with the consent of the British and Egyptian governments in 1956, resulting in an Arab-led government which failed to integrate and gain the trust of the southern regions of the country (Holt, 1979: 178). This sparked decades of civil wars, with devastating effects on the economy and the population, which faced starvation, lack of education and depleted health care. It is estimated that the ongoing civil war has displaced more than four million southern Sudanese people. In 1991, the government instituted Islamic law (Shari' a) with the intention of transforming Sudan into a Muslim Arab state, sparking new criticism from southern regions (www.nationmaster.com). Both Mahjoub and Aboulela write about the dysfunctional Muslim African polity, but whereas Aboulela critiques from within the arena of religious belief, Mahjoub speaks from a secular position about the negative effect of the connection of religion and politics in his home country.

Religious contexts of departure

"What Islam are you talking about?" asked Wad Rayyes. "It's your Islam and Hajj Ahmed's Islam, because you can't tell what's good for you from what's bad. The Nigerians, the Egyptians, and the Arabs of Syria, aren't they Moslems like us?" (Salih, 2003 [1969]: 81, emphasis added)

These words by an unsavoury character in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* express the often overlooked dilemma of a religion that might seem to desire uniformity but that "like other religions, is not a generic essence, but a nominal entity that conjoins, by means of a name, a variety of societies, cultures, histories and polities" (Hawley, 1998: 21). The historical overview suggests that Islam plays a central part in the cultural heritage of the regions discussed in the thesis. All four writers are influenced to varying degrees by Muslim culture and thus it is necessary to consider the role of Islam in their writing. Their intercultural writing is also inter-religious and thus engages in dialogue with secular and other religious discourses. The use of the term Islam does not necessarily refer to personal commitment of the individual authors but to the religious context in their countries of origin. As a result, we find different versions of 'Islam' in their texts.

In his introduction 'Islam(s) in African Literature' of the edited collection *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, Harrow points out that very often Islam in Africa is seen as "an object, and especially as a foreign object introjected into a land distant in space and culture from its point of origin" and thus "has conventionally been reduced to the notion of a predetermined monolith" (Harrow, 1991: 3). As a result, varying groups of people have been transformed into "one undifferentiated body, 'Muslims'" and Islam has been reduced by this totalising tendency to "an unchanging doctrine" (Harrow, 1991: 3). Looking at the texts by the four writers suggests the multivalent nature of the term 'Islam', reflecting diversities of African culture and particular idiosyncrasies of individual authors. Thus various religious/cultural traditions are represented in the literary texts.

In the chapters that follow, we will see how Aboulela's fiction particularly creates an awareness of the power structures embedded in conflicting representations through her insightful portrayal of male-female relationships in traditional and semi-secular Islamic society in the Sudan and abroad. Her writing engages in the re-translating of the silent woman in Islam, into a discourse of self-expression and identity building within the parameter of faith. We will see that her fiction, with its insistence on a religious worldview, functions as defiance against the hegemony of a secular worldview. Her characters grapple with the personal crisis faced by many Muslims around the world, who "wonder how they can be integrated into the modern world without losing their souls" (Hawley, 1998: 4). Aboulela's texts engage with the problem of the need to assert belief in doctrines which are under attack by modernity and secularism in small measure at home but much more aggressively in the host society. She is the only author discussed here who practices her faith. The other three authors have embraced secularism and their engagement with their heritage is perhaps more cultural than religious. As Hawley points out, the discourses of "revelation and postmodernism have little complimentary to say to each other" (Hawley, 1998: 2).

We will see that Vassanji, rather than inscribing revelation, invents a postmodernist religious group called the Shamsis, who mix Islam with non-muslim and Hindu elements. This narrative device functions as a critique of fundamentalist religious discourses, insisting that syncretic formations are more inclusive than communities inspired by "Arabism and Islamic imperialism" (Vassanji, 1999: 205). Hence, Vassanji uses this inter-religious translation to display in sharp relief the intermingling of cultures that questions any simple construction of origin and excludes cultural and religious purism. Vassanji's texts also engage with the translation/transition of the migrants from belief to secularism, thereby interrogating the resilience of religious discourse in the experience of migrancy. Vassanji has distanced himself from the sensibilities of believers, but his portrayal of characters who practice their faith is sympathetic.

Like Vassanji, Gurnah portrays the Islamic faith as a source of continuity/safety for some of his migrant characters in the face of turmoil, even though he himself is not religious.

A recurrent character in this body of fiction exemplifies religious righteousness and exaggerated authority, thus exerting often harsh expectations on other characters. In Vassanji's *No New Land*, Nurdin's father's disapproval of his son causes psychological damage, but at the same time, the father is a revered religious authority in the community in Dar. Similarly, in Gurnah's novel *Admiring Silence*, the stepfather, who is very devout, creates anxiety and rejection for the main protagonist.

Mahjoub's *Wings of Dust*, rather than focusing on a single character, critiques religious authority in the Sudan more systematically and shows how, once this authority is compounded with political power, many ordinary Muslim people suffer. The abuses of religious authority therefore find echoes in contemporary Islamic African fiction and to differing degrees all four writers engage with the destructive, unethical forces of religion. It merits notice that whenever religious authority is institutionally linked to state power as it is in the Sudan, it leads to a conflation of the critiques against the misuse of religious authority with unethical practices of state authority (Hawley, 1998: 6).

Islam in African literature is contingent, pointing to the way Africans appropriated the religion and made it their own, thereby changing it to suit its different contexts: "what occurred was a series of adaptations in which Islam came to occupy increasingly important spaces in the lives of various people" and sometimes resulting in the syncretism of traditional African spirituality with Islamic ideas (Hawley, 1998: 7-12). Identifying this mixing of beliefs and also the rejection of them as characteristic of contemporary African fiction, Johnson points out that "thematic and narrative structures more often resolve in syncretism and tension than in a return to orthodoxy" (Johnson, 1991: 240). He attributes this to

the tendency in modern African literature to “present religious phenomena primarily in terms of their contribution to crises of allegiance and identity” (Johnson, 1991: 240).

What Johnson claims and what is useful for this discussion, is that the Afro-Islamic context is “more often than not, an al-Mukhlit one” where the crisis of allegiance is “resolved in syncretism and tension” (Johnson, 1991: 240). Al-Mukhlit is a term meaning the mixers and derives from “Islamic counterheretical thinking” and thus it can imply a “purist concern with apostasy, heresy, and syncretism” (Johnson, 1991: 240). This derogatory term has been retranslated and appropriated to express that ‘mixing’ is a condition within which people engage with Islam. This al-mukhlit writing can be found in the chapters dealing with Mahjoub, Vassanji and Gurnah, where the construction of a transnational identity often arises out of severe and agonising crises of allegiance to a home culture and a faith that seems to sit so uneasily with a secular and materialist environment in the West. For example, there are descriptions of an earnest prayer of one character alongside the secular rejection of faith by another in Gurnah’s *By the Sea*. Or we see Vassanji’s invention of the Shamsi sect as an attempt to reject religious orthodoxy in favour of a syncretic mixing.

Mahjoub allows for orthodoxy in his description of the religious and scientific rigour of the secret community in the Valley of Dreamers in his novel *The Carrier* yet this can be contrasted with his scathing critique of the religious and political elite in the Sudan in his earlier text *Wings of Dust*. Aboulela’s writing is not al-mukhlit writing as her fear of apostasy, of losing the soul in face of the secular environment, informs her religious structuring of the narratives in her texts. The other three novelists, Mahjoub, Vassanji and Gurnah, keep the tensions of the cultural and religious interstices in their texts alive, without allowing a resolution of the conflict.

This tension, which results from the pressures of the varied religious forces at work due to cultural change informs much of the religious aspects in the texts by Aboulela, Mahjoub, Gurnah and Vassanji. Faqir argues that the writing of Arabs in the West, creating an Arab book in the language of the Other, “treads the divide between [...] cultures” and suffers, as well as benefits, from occupying such a site, as “displacement urges transcultural writers to revisit their culture of origin by the essential questioning of their relationships with their body, faiths, rites, languages” (Faqir, 2004: 168). The texts bear the signs of such reassessments and translations of faith and religious rites when people are confronted with other cultural beliefs, secularism being but one option in this melange of choices. The way in which such reassessments are made has to do with the individual biographies of the transcultural writers, the focus of the next section.

Personal contexts of departure

Leila Aboulela was born in 1964 in Khartoum of an Egyptian mother (who was the Sudan's first-ever female demographer) and a Sudanese father (Sethi, 2005: 1). She was brought up and educated in Khartoum, first in a private American school, she later graduated from the University of Khartoum in 1985 with a degree in economics, before moving to London in her mid-twenties (Miller, 2002; Faqir, 2004). Aboulela insists that her school environment in Khartoum was very westernised and that both her grandmother, who studied medicine in the forties, and her mother, who was a university professor, were very progressive (Sethi, 2005: 1). It is immediately evident that Aboulela's Khartoum was bourgeois and colonial. Her faith in Islam was imparted by her grandmother and mother as a very “personal and private thing” and her idea of religion “wasn't about a woman not working or having to dress in a certain way” (Sethi, 2005: 1). Aboulela studied for her PhD in Statistics at the London School of Economics and it was in Britain that she started to wear the hijab, because there she had the “accessibility of the mosque” and she experienced a “sense of alienation” which made her realise

that “there is only you and God” (Sethi, 2005: 1). Her husband works on oilrigs, so she has lived in Egypt, Jakarta, Dubai, London and Aberdeen. She currently lives in Aberdeen with her husband and three children (Sethi, 2005: 1-2).

Aboulela’s marginalisation as an African Muslim Woman in Britain, as expressed in her fiction, relates to the interstices of Western and Islamic patriarchy, as well as cultural differences, particularly in relation to Islam in a secular environment. In the Sudan she belongs to the cultural majority of Northern Sudanese Islamic rule (which controls most of the country’s limited resources). We can gather from the work situation of her mother, that she grew up in a household that is firmly situated in the more affluent sector of Sudanese society.

In this respect she differs from the other three novelists discussed here, who occupy a more marginalised position in their African countries of departure, where their African-ness has come under scrutiny. Aboulela’s background does not make her fiction less insightful or her perception of cultural difference less acute. Her particular contribution to the conversation in this thesis lies with the attention she pays to the migration of Muslim women, who are so often overlooked. Her fiction advances a feminised Islamic discourse to counter “the marginalisation in an empty Western metropolis” (Nash, 2002: 28) and to “make Islam more familiar to the reader” (Sethi, 2005: 2). Her narrative voice thus adds speaking female subjects to the conversation that is otherwise dominated by an all-male cast of characters.

Her first Novel, *The Translator* (1999), has been long-listed for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards 2001, the Orange Prize 2000 and short-listed for the Saltire Prize. It has been translated into Spanish, German and Dutch. Aboulela won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000 for “The Museum”, which appeared in a collection of short stories, *Coloured Lights*, in 2001. Many of her stories have been broadcast on BBC radio. Her most recent novel, *Minaret*, appeared in 2005. Both novels and the collection of short stories investigate the subtleties of Muslim immigrant experience in Britain. Her fiction explores the often complex culture

clashes and the possibilities of living in the West with different, non-western, ways of knowing and thinking. In her writing, she problematises social issues, sense of identity and terms of reference, elucidating the tentative and complex relationships between people spanning this divide. Faqir argues that Aboulela's "halaal fiction" while propagating "an Islamic world view" is also a good example of "transcultural and transnational literature" (Faqir, 2004: 169). The term halaal aptly describes her fiction and its difference to the al-mukhlit writing of the other three authors.

The chapter on Aboulela's work focuses on nostalgia as an ambivalent and conflicting concept that permeates all her fiction and influences her cultural translations. Even though Aboulela strives to disavow nostalgia in her own life, the fact that her fiction engages with it in several ways powerfully illustrates the conflicts of migrancy, where the memory of the home country exerts a particular hold on the migrant's imagination. This has to do with the difficulty of making the new place of residence into a 'home' as Aboulela points out in an interview with Susan Miller at the Edinburgh book fair.

There she speaks about her favourite short story "The Ostrich" from *Coloured Lights*: "It focuses on a woman who arrives in London at the airport and her extreme reaction to this new land she has arrived in and how much she really doesn't want to be there" (Miller, 2002: 2). The chapter on Aboulela's writing will argue that most of her stories centre on this extreme reaction to the West. In the same interview, when asked about the characters, who are torn between the culture of their homeland and their place of residence, Aboulela replies:

I consider wherever my family are to be my home. Khartoum is still home, but because I have been living in different places I am OK with being wherever. To my children Aberdeen is home. (Miller, 2002: 3-4)

This statement, with its lingering "Khartoum is still home" is of particular interest, since in most of Aboulela's fiction, Khartoum is described with longing and

nostalgia. While Aboulela asserts her transnationality in this interview, and given also Islam's transnational nature, her fiction frequently speaks of local, African, and specifically Khartoumian experience that constitutes the matrix against which other experiences are measured.

Jamal Mahjoub was born in London in 1960. After growing up in Liverpool, Mahjoub and his family moved back to the Sudan when he was nine years old. He finished school at the Camboni College run by Italian priests and won a scholarship to study geology at Sheffield University in the UK. He lived in Denmark for a while and now lives in Barcelona. In his work, Mahjoub has used this background of cross-cultural experience and his training as a geologist to great effect.

His first novel, *Navigation of a Rainmaker* (1989), is an interesting extension of his own situation, as the main character, Tanner, is also half-British, half-Sudanese. He then published *Wings of Dust* (1994) which also deals with the issue of diasporic people and their return to the Sudan. *The Hour of Signs* (1996) is a historical novel set in nineteenth century Sudan during the time of the Mhadi and the siege of Khartoum. In Mahjoub's next novel, *The Carrier* (1998), the reader is given two protagonists, living in different centuries. The first plot line plays in the 17th century and describes the journey of Rashid al-Kenzy from Algiers to Sweden in the quest for the telescope. The second plotline in the 20th century centres around Hassan, a geologist, who finds a brass case in Denmark, engraved with Rashid's name and tries to solve the mystery of how it got there. The process of the novel follows both protagonists' journeys into unknown terrain. In *Travelling with Djinn*s (2003), Yasin, the protagonist of mixed parentage, is driving and drifting through Europe with his young son, Leo, reflecting on his displaced life and the different worlds Leo will inherit. His latest novel, *The Drift Latitudes* (2006), again comprises a cast of characters whose lives meet in Britain but whose roots lie scattered across the globe. Mahjoub, in a paper on Globalisation, remarks about such cultural displacement:

In moving from one cultural sphere to another we take shortcuts, make adjustments, to fit into the landscape. Each time we relocate our lives we have to leave something of ourselves behind so as to make room for what we encounter. The way we dress, the food we eat, the places we pray, are all obvious examples of this, but they are only the outward manifestations of the intrinsic changes we undergo. It is a kind of acclimatisation, and it is part of that process of relocating. (Mahjoub, 1997)

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in 1948 in Zanzibar, Tanzania to parents of Yemeni and Kenyan origins (Anonymous, 2001b: 1). As already mentioned, he is currently the head of the School of English at the University of Kent at Canterbury. He is the author of numerous novels: *Memory of Departure* (1987), *Pilgrim's Way* (1988), *Dottie* (1990), *Paradise* (1994, shortlisted for the Booker Prize), *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001) and *Desertion* (2005, winner of the 2006 Commonwealth Writers Prize). Most of his fiction, with the exception of *Paradise* and parts of *Desertion*, is set in England with a "diverse cast of immigrants who, in their daily contacts with English people, attempt to come to terms with their identity" (Bardolph, 1998: 82). In *Memory of Departure* Gurnah problematises Tanzania's independence which shows in stark relief racial divisions emerging in the new nation. Hassan, the protagonist, and his classmates were "delud[ing] themselves with visions of unity and racial harmony. With our history of the misuse and oppression of Africans by an alliance of Arabs, Indians, and Europeans, it was naïve to expect that things would turn out differently" (Gurnah, 1987: 28). The migrants of Gurnah's novels end up in England, yet again displaced and floundering.

Moyez G. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 of Indian parents, and raised in Tanzania. When he was nineteen, he left the University of Nairobi on a scholarship to study physics at MIT in Massachusetts. He graduated with a PhD in nuclear physics from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1978 he settled in Toronto, Canada where he still lives with his wife and two sons. He is the author of five novels and a collection of short stories: *The Gunny Sack* (1989, regional

Commonwealth Prize), *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994, Giller Prize, Bressani Prize), *Amriika* (1999) and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2004, Giller Prize). His collection of short stories, *Uhuru Street*, appeared in 1992. Vassanji, like Gurnah, Mahjoub and Aboulela, is a writer whose genealogy of life and work challenges simple constructions of what constitutes an African text or an African writer. In an interview with Kanaganayakam, Vassanji explains his African past in relation to Salim, the narrator of the *Gunny Sack*:

I was born in Kenya, in Nairobi, at just about the time when the narrator, Salim, [...] was born there. There is an autobiographical element in that. My father was born in Kenya and died there and we moved to Tanzania after his death, but the story about the father's family in the book is completely fictitious. I did that to give Salim *deeper roots in Africa. I felt like an African, and I gave my narrator a more tangible Africanness by making one of his ancestors an African.* (Kanaganayakam, 1991: 20, emphasis added)

Cultural translation is at work in the very conscious negotiation of identity, the claiming of roots that is inevitably linked to routes⁷ is evidenced in the same interview when Vassanji explains that “although we were Africans, we were also Indians”; “I see myself as an Afro-Indian”; “I am not an immigrant who believes that you have to leave everything behind” (Kanaganayakam, 1991: 20). In his texts, Vassanji explores the multiple relationships of entanglement between Africanness/Indianness and the West.

What drew me to this body of work was my own experience of being an immigrant, of the voluntary kind, in South Africa, studying and writing in translation, in a language that is not my mother tongue. Coming from a secondary education that hardly considers English literature, let alone African writing, my sense of knowledge production in one given culture was challenged by my tertiary education in South Africa. Having arrived in this country, and on this continent, from Germany in 1995, just after the demise of Apartheid, as a

⁷ The wordplay of “roots” and “routes” comes from Clifford’s book *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997).

foreign student, has sharpened my awareness of how in an intercultural context, a variety of ways of knowing and representing the world coexists in contesting and conflicting entanglements. The awareness of the dangers of cultural superiority inscribed through history lessons on the Holocaust and the annual commemoration of the Reichskristallnacht⁸ on the ninth of November at my Gymnasium, made me, and arguably, many other young Germans, wary of regarding the nation as home.

This ambivalent relationship to the country of departure is something that interests me, and all four authors address this in their fiction in one way or another. Reflecting on the question of when or whether a place of residence becomes 'home', has made me realise that it depends largely on the social relations that define one's difference to the host culture. This relationship between migrant and host country is also marked by ambivalence, for the writers under discussion and to a much lesser extent for myself as well. Dealing with the Department of Home Affairs in South Africa makes it very clear to the immigrant from Europe that one is not welcome. This institutionalised hostility does not translate into the everyday⁹ and this is where my generally positive and enriching experience of migration differs from most, though not all, migrants depicted in the intercultural literature that I am going to examine¹⁰. Interestingly, the authors now living and working in the Western host countries are in positions of economic privilege similar to my own, but their skin colour situates them, and their fictional migrants, visibly in the position of the Other and thus inserts them into a discourse which disavows their middle class position within the social hierarchy by identifying them as immigrants and asylum seekers.

⁸ The night of glass, where throughout Germany shop windows and synagogues were damaged and set alight. This was the first very overt act of antisemitism in the early thirties.

⁹ Whereas the dealing with home affairs' officials can be extremely hostile (so much so that one seems unable to communicate without the help of an immigration agent) and burdened by bureaucratic hurdles, the everyday interaction with South Africans of different cultures has been mostly welcoming.

¹⁰ I am very much aware that as a white European one immediately is inserted into a position of privilege in South Africa, even though post-Apartheid immigration policies say otherwise.

The biographies of the authors define them as translated people, who had to learn to live different lives in different languages and whose texts present the reader with multiple cultural translations. They also hint at the possibility of new relationships within their novels but more so between the texts and the readers¹¹. The chapters that follow this introduction will consider two texts by each author from roughly the same period of production, spanning a decade from 1991 to 2001. This similar time period will confirm that the conversation across the novels by the four authors, even though artificially constructed, offers interesting and fruitful insights about cultural translation and elucidates similar preoccupations in terms of using fiction in order to construct new transcultural identities.

¹¹ In the second year seminars at the University of Cape Town, where some of these novels are taught, one could observe these new relationships. In all classes the Muslim students acted as cultural brokers and became knowledgeable in a way seldom experienced at University. There were also frequent comments by the non-Muslim students about their shifting perception of Islam from a position of media influenced stereotypes to a more nuanced and less antagonistic position. I argue that at least for some students, this experience of cultural difference resulted in, to use Bhabha's words again, the "linkages" of "literature and life" (Bhabha, 1994: 227).

Chapter Two

Strategic Nostalgia, Islam and Cultural Translation in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) and *Coloured Lights* (2001)

I was crying [...] maybe because I was homesick, not only for my daughters or my family but *sick with longing for the heat, the sweat and the water of the Nile*. The English word 'homesick' is a good one; we do not have exactly the same word in Arabic. In Arabic my state would have been described as 'yearning for the homeland' or the 'sorrow of alienation' and there is also truth in this. I was alienated from this place where darkness descended unnaturally at 4pm and people went about their business as if nothing had happened. (Aboulela 2001: 1, emphasis added)

"Ours isn't a religion of suffering," he said, "*nor is it tied to a particular place*." His words made her feel close to him, pulled in, closer than any time before because it was "ours" now, not hers alone. (Aboulela, 1999: 179-180, emphasis added)

Strategic Nostalgia: Introduction

Aboulela's voice is quite different to the voices of the three other authors. Her angle on cultural translation is influenced by two important factors which are absent in Mahjoub, Gurnah and Vassanji. Firstly, her personal relationship to Khartoum and by extension the Sudan, is not one of traumatic rupture and forced departure. As a result, Aboulela's texts are more overtly nostalgic, her migrants are more powerfully attached to 'home'. Secondly, Aboulela insists that migrancy does not have to entail secularisation in the Western environment whereas most of the other author's characters lose their faith in moving from Africa to the West. In fact, her fiction argues for the complex and difficult possibility of translating between the new environment and the past in such a way that a spiritual connection is maintained. The nostalgic backward glance in her fiction functions as an assertion of a particular past which needs to be translated into a secular pluralised present. This backward glance is not an act of denial of the changes

that occur in migration, but an attempt to salvage a set of root memories into the present: to imagine a present that allows for the continuation of a particular past.

What is striking about Aboulela's contribution to the conversation between the four authors is that her women characters, who are triply marginalised by being African, Muslim and female, do not succumb to the pressures of assimilation. On the contrary, Aboulela writes revisionist fiction, in which women negotiate migration on their own terms. Nostalgia in her texts functions strategically in providing the characters with an imaginary, often romanticised memory of the past, which becomes the basis of their critique of the present in the West. At the same time, Aboulela is aware of the limitations of this nostalgic outlook as it disallows her migrants to settle in the new environment. Once the critique of the West is established in the narratives, nostalgia gives way to Aboulela's transnational vision of Islam, which is not bound to a particular location and which accommodates movement and change. However, this change happens within the strict parameters of religious discourse, resulting in some narrative resolutions that appear to be contrived but logical in terms of Aboulela's ideological framework.

Aboulela's collection of short stories, *Coloured Lights* (2001), and her novel, *The Translator* (1999), engage with the subtleties of Muslim African emigrant experience in Britain. They portray cross-cultural encounters and the complexities of living in the West with different, non-western, ways of knowing and thinking. Aboulela's fiction shows that migration places her devout Muslim female characters within the regulating discourses of Islamism on the one hand and Orientalism/Africanism on the other. In order to delve into issues of migration, Aboulela confronts Orientalist and Islamist hegemonic discourses which both stereotype and predetermine 'The Muslim Woman'. Khan, in her study of Muslim immigrant women in Canada, points out that "in turning away from the discourse and image of self as the stereotyped 'Muslim Woman', individual women turn toward either the West or Islam for affirmation" (Khan,

2002: 308). Aboulela presents narratives of complex negotiations of identity which turn to Islam for affirmation. This turning to Islam frees up a space for her female characters in which Western stereotypes have no signifying power, in which cultural memory is validated and incorporated into the present.

The recourse to romantic nostalgic memories allows Aboulela to take on the Orientalist/Africanist assumptions of the Western environment by invoking a home where spirituality and modernity co-exist. At the same time, in order to critique some of the patriarchal practices at home, sanctioned by the religious status quo, the nostalgic vision gives way to a less idealised and more realistic assessment of home, whenever her characters return. Aboulela uses nostalgia strategically in her texts to negotiate cultural translation on her own terms by embodying a past in the sensory memories of her characters. She foregrounds their religious inheritance and its usefulness in countering the anxieties around migration. Aboulela explains

“I am interested in writing about Islam not as an identity but going deeper and showing the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim who has faith. My characters do not necessarily behave as a ‘good Muslim’ should. They are, [...], ordinary Muslims trying to practice their faith in difficult circumstance and in a society which is unsympathetic to religion”. (Eissa 2005: 1)

This quotation points to crucial concerns of this chapter. Firstly, by avoiding exemplary Muslim characters, who would perfectly fit into Islamist representations of the faithful, Aboulela subtly translates Islamicist discourse into women's narratives that open up a supplementary space of daily translations and negotiations of self and identity. In this way she affirms religion, but not in an oppressive form, rather stressing its positive function in the lives of ordinary women. Secondly, she makes clear that her fiction engages directly with an environment that is unsympathetic to religion. In other words, she exposes racism and anti-Muslim sentiment, which continually insert her female characters into Orientalist/Africanist discourses. The defence of her characters in this

situation is to turn to nostalgia, particularly initially, which affirms their identity in opposition to their environment. Eventually however, when her migrant women establish themselves in the Western environment permanently, some of this acute nostalgia gives way to an understanding of Islam as a transnational religion with a community of believers in the West. Thus we will see in her fiction that “the sacred provides [inner harmony] in a chaotic, commodity-oriented world”, where the characters suffer from the dislocation of migration and its attendant feelings of alienation (Ghazoul, 2001: 3).

The disjunctions in space and time that Aboulela’s characters experience through migration and displacement, plus the often hostile reactions of the host society, highlight the difficulties of being Muslim and practising Islam in the West. Khan points out that in minority diasporic communities the “grounding as a Muslim is significantly more fragile than in the women’s ‘home’ countries” (Khan, 2002: 312). This we see in Aboulela’s texts as well. Aboulela offers different responses to this fragility in her fiction: the nostalgic recollection of the past in Africa and the repeated avowal that Islam is transnational and universal. Whereas the nostalgic memory experienced by the characters through the senses of touch, smell, sight, and taste emphasises the rupture of migration, Islam is presented in her texts as the antidote and therefore better response to this sense of loss. A spiritual connection to Allah, Aboulela claims, can assuage feelings of grief and loss and forge human connections that are unexpected and sometimes transcendent of cultural borders. Whereas nostalgia suggests connection to a particular location, Islam suggests belonging, a belonging independent of the characters physical location. In this way she “reverses the fatalism of the emigrant novel” (Nash, 2002: 30). The fatalism of the emigrant novel lies in the extreme alienation of the migrant who is eventually crushed by this experience, which will be illustrated in the discussion of Gurnah’s *Admiring Silence*. Aboulela’s texts however insist that the transnationality of Islam insures her migrants a welcoming and hospitable community as well as some sense of agency in an often bewildering environment.

In her novel, *The Translator*, Aboulela portrays her protagonist's movement from nostalgia and frequent recollections of Africa to creation of a home in the West, because Islam "is [not] tied to a particular place" (Aboulela, 1999: 179). Aboulela uses nostalgia to chart the initial reaction of her characters to life in Britain. She asserts that the characters can be at home wherever, if they find their stability in faith and the community of believers, the *Umma*. For example, in her personal life, Aboulela has found the support of "the sisters at the Aberdeen Mosque" invaluable in the sense that they provided her with "a new family away from home" (Eissa, 2005: 1). This experience of a home away from home within the community of faith is central to her fiction.

It is important to note that this response – the nostalgic backward glance and the seeking of shelter in faith - insists on a particular way of cultural translation which foregrounds the 'original text' as in a translation, that is the experiences and values of the place of departure. Aboulela's fiction therefore critiques those processes of cultural translation that involve the migrant's acculturation to the Western host society. In her texts this kind of acculturation constitutes an attack on Islamic doctrine and practice and ultimately results in the weakening of her characters' sense of identity. She thus rejects al-mukhlit writing in favour of orthodoxy, which insists that "identity consists in the self-conscious adherence to the community of believers and their doctrinal elaborations" (Harrow, 1991: 3). Although she endorses faith, her writing on the whole resists religious formulae. The inherent limitations of her doctrinal positioning explain the few instances where her writing becomes formulaic.

Moreover, Aboulela carefully avoids doctrines which would place her women characters under severe control of patriarchal structures. Instead she tries to emphasise the room for movement and negotiation provided within the category of 'Muslim'. Therefore even when insisting on what Nash terms an "inner Islamic core" which cannot be translated or negotiated, Aboulela clearly creates female

protagonists who occupy a space between “Western cultural imperialism and conservative, anti-modernist Islamism” (Nash, 2002: 28; 30). Her fiction thus engages in but also resists processes of cultural translation, just as it employs nostalgia but ultimately points to the transnationality of faith. It is these complex and intricate connections between cultural translation, nostalgia and Islam that this chapter seeks to understand, contextualising her fiction within regulating discourses of Orientalism/Africanism and Islamism and illustrating how Aboulela introduces nostalgia, the memories of departure, as a response to such discourses.

Orientalism, Islamism and supplementary spaces

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution of dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views on it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said, 1978: 3)

Said (1978) has demonstrated the oppressive ideological premises of Orientalism. He pointed out then, and as Aboulela’s texts exemplify this is still relevant today, that most representations of Islam are informed by Orientalist discourse. Mudimbe, following Said’s argument, has demonstrated that Africa and Africans are also subjected to similar discursive practices, which he describes as Africanism (Mudimbe, 1988 & 1994). Aboulela engages with this discourse in her fiction, where she exposes stereotypes and racism towards her characters. In this way she distances herself from such regulating and reductive discourses.

Africanist hegemonic discourse works by relying on stereotypes of the Other. Bhabha reminds us that “the stereotype [...] is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that is anxiously repeated” (Bhabha, 1994: 66). Implying racial or sexual inferiority, the stereotype is the “primary point of subjectification” in

Africanist discourse which constantly reiterates the meanings of the signifier “*skin/culture*” as “racial typology [and] ideologies of racial and cultural dominance or degeneration” (Bhabha, 1994: 75). Moreover, as mentioned in the introduction, Said argues that there is almost a “total absence of any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately to discuss the Arabs or Islam” (Said, 1978: 27). Europe’s sense of superiority over the Islamic world might take different forms ranging from romantic, exoticising discourses to those driven by fear and hatred. All these forms participate in Othering and homogenising of the Orient/Africa. Khan argues that such fantasies are still present today as “societies in which Islam is the religion of the majority continue to be seen as totalizing religious and ideological orders” (Khan, 2002: 308). In Aboulela’s novel, *The Translator*, the protagonist, Sammar, is wearing *hijab*, thereby expressing her religious affiliation. When she works for the Languages department, her head of department calls her in to assure her that she had “no problem at all” with the way Sammar dresses (Aboulela, 1999: 89). This instance of narrative irony points to the often hidden expression of disapproval, evident in the following scene:

Her head in the Languages department was a woman named Jennifer, who one day, unexpectedly and abruptly called Sammar, asked her to sit down and said that she was not religious but respected people who were religious. Sammar sat and nodded politely. She felt like a child who had stayed up too late at night and was discovering that in the adult world there were things she could not understand. (Aboulela, 1999: 88)

This patronising assurance of acceptance is part of the covert hostility towards Sammar, but sometimes the racism she experiences is more direct, like the sneering tenant of her block of flats, or a man shouting at her in the street: “*Saddam Hussein*” (Aboulela, 1999: 88, emphasis in original). Here we see a crude version of what Mamdani identifies as “Culture Talk” where individual Muslims are assumed to be “bad” unless proven otherwise, because their culture is perceived as antagonistic and inherently violent (Mamdani, 2004: 15; Mahjoub, 2002: 4). In the same passage, Aboulela draws attention to the Orientalist

assumption that in Islamic societies religion is the overriding influence while other regional and cultural differences are ignored: "That was during the Gulf War, when *suddenly* everyone became aware that Sammar was Muslim" (Aboulela, 1999: 88, emphasis added).

The short stories from *Coloured Lights*, also provide examples of Aboulela's criticism of Western perceptions of Others. In 'The Museum' Aboulela addresses the power relations of the foreign students and their Scottish counterparts, pointing to the marginalisation experienced by the foreigners in the Western metropolis. Shadia, the protagonist of this story, muses: "Us and them, she thought. The ones who would do well, the ones who would crawl and sweat and barely pass" (Aboulela, 2001: 100). This acute sense of failure and marginalisation has terrible consequences:

Asafa, the short, round-faced Ethiopian, said, in his grave voice, as this collection from the Third World whispered their anxieties in grim Scottish corridors, the girls in nervous giggles, "Last year, last year a Nigerian on this very same course committed suicide". (Aboulela, 2001: 100)

Aboulela illustrates here with what fragility even the fairly prestigious position as a foreign student is maintained successfully. In the same story, Aboulela contrasts the picture of hospitable Scotland portrayed in the glossy handbook for overseas students with an incident of racism: "Badr, the Malaysian, blinked, whispered, 'Yesterday our windows got smashed; my wife today is afraid to go out'" (Aboulela, 2001: 101). Shadia, who comes to Aberdeen for a Masters degree in Statistics, meets Bryan, a local student and both are challenged to reassess their stereotypes and cultural clichés. In this story, this process of cross-cultural encounter is seriously hampered by intrusive and damaging Africanist discourse which imprisons the characters in their predetermined positions. The power of this discourse becomes particularly apparent in the space of the local museum.

In this short story the characters get stuck in the terrain of post-colonial politics: the Scottish museum on Africa functions as a site of imperial power. Aboulela offers a scathing critique of Western historiography, but interestingly this is balanced by her less than sympathetic portrayal of Shadia, who is insincere, extremely class conscious and at times quite cruel. Bryan is the more likeable of the two protagonists but his naiveté is staggering and thus he fuels Shadia's stereotypes about the West. They meet at the University, where Shadia is one of a group of foreign students who battle with the course material and the racism they encounter. Shadia manages because she steps over the 'us and them' divide and asks Bryan, a Scottish student, for his lecture notes from the previous year to acquire the necessary background. Just to ask for the notes requires from Shadia the crossing of cultural boundaries:

At first Shadia was afraid to ask him for his notes. The earring made her afraid. And the straight long hair that he tied up in with a rubber band. She had never seen a man with an earring and such long hair. But then she had never known such cold, so much rain. His silver earring was the *strangeness of the West, another culture-shock*. (Aboulela, 2001: 99, my emphasis)

Like Rae's religious conversion to Islam in *The Translator*, here too Bryan's willingness to cut his hair, remove the earring and learn about Islam can be read as subtle "counter-acculturation" (Nash, 2002: 30). This movement however is interrupted by their visit to the museum, where the particular memories and memorabilia represented prevent any common ground on which to build a cross-cultural connection. The most sustained critique of Orientalist/Africanist discourse in the descriptions of the disconnected objects in the display cabinets – "iron and copper, little statues" – are loot from imperial travel to Africa and Shadia realises that "nothing was of her, nothing belonged to her life at home, what she missed. This was Europe's vision, the clichés about Africa: cold and old" (Aboulela, 2001: 115). Shadia feels humiliated by the displays which focus on Scottish travellers who returned wealthy, laden with "cotton watered by the Blue Nile" and other possessions from Africa in "over-flowing trunks" (Aboulela, 2001: 114-116). This

scene echoes Clifford's argument that museum exhibits can build on and perpetuate historical legacies of imperial oppression of the people represented in them (Clifford, 1997: 174). Because of the museum displays, Shadia rejects Bryan as a friend and Aboulela stresses that their relationship across cultures, which had so much potential, is made impossible by a discourse that leaves too little room for negotiation of identities. The power of empire present in the museum space, as well as her personal struggles with the course and the Scottish environment defeat her wish to connect with Bryan:

He didn't know it was a steep path she had no strength for. He didn't understand. Many things, years and landscapes, gulfs. If she was strong she would have explained and not tired of explaining. She would have patiently taught him another language, letters curved like the epsilon and gamma he knew from mathematics. If she was not small in the museum, if she was really strong, she would have made his trip to Mecca real, not only in a book. (Aboulela, 2001: 119)

Mecca in this story functions as an escape landscape, which encapsulates alternative possibilities for both characters. The text mentions it first when Shadia and Bryan share a coffee break at the University and he confesses "We did Islam at school," he said. 'Ah went on a trip to Mecca.' He *opened out his palms* on the table. 'What!' 'In a book.' 'Oh'" (Aboulela, 2001: 112, my emphasis). Bryan's interest in Islam is real and Aboulela shows this by his open palms, which leave it up to Shadia to respond – the text therefore suggests a real opportunity to engage in cross-cultural translation. The imagined trip to Mecca, and all that it would entail for the two characters, is Aboulela's alternative vision to a reality which entraps both characters in Africanist discourse. In this same conversation, Bryan repeats again "Ah wouldnea mind travelling to Mecca; I was keen on that book" (Aboulela, 2001: 110). Shadia is acutely aware of the hidden possibilities of the situation and agrees to go to the museum the following day. It is there, in the museum space where Shadia is defined as "outside the community of power" (Cooper, 2006), that their relationship and its possible translation is doomed to failure. The museum destroys the present that the

characters might have had by the representation of the past that denies Shadia's world its existence:

'They are telling you lies in this museum,' she said. 'Don't believe them. It's all wrong. It's not jungles and antelopes, it's people. We have things like computers and cars. We have 7UP in Africa and some people, few people, have bathrooms with golden taps... I shouldn't be here with you. You shouldn't talk to me...' (Aboulela, 2001: 119)

When contrasting imperial history with modern day Africa, Shadia firmly reasserts Fareed's presence in her life. Yet Shadia is threatened by Bryan's honesty, particularly since she is living a lie. Her relationship to Fareed, her fat, rich and superficial fiancé, is one of deception and lies. She only intends to marry him for his money and status – something Bryan lacks, his father being a joiner and his mother a lollipop lady (Aboulela, 2001: 109-10). Aboulela's story is very complex, because in the same breath that Shadia exposes imperialist lies, she repeats her own personal lies of a life with Fareed. Mecca, an imagined home where Shadia and Bryan could possibly escape Africanist discourse, which fixes them on either side of an unbridgeable gap, becomes an alternative space to both Scotland and Khartoum. The text thus insists that Shadia's life in Khartoum with a husband who does not believe in Islam is just as wrong as Bryan's life without any faith at all. It is for this reason that Aboulela invokes Mecca, the other landscape in the last line of the story: "if she was really strong, she would have made his trip to Mecca real, not only in a book" (Aboulela, 2001: 119). The potential of Mecca as such an other landscape is not realised as this short story registers the destructive power of Africanist discourse in cross-cultural relationships. Aboulela not only manoeuvres in the terrain of Western stereotyping but she also takes on aspects of Islamicist discourse which seek to dominate and control her women characters.

These discourses which stress the subjugation and patriarchal control of women do not find much room in her fiction. Instead she portrays her characters' spirituality as a liberating force, which affords them the room to construct

transnational identities as Muslim women. Particularly in the portrayal of tertiary education and employment opportunities for her characters, Aboulela critiques some of the gender issues inherent in Islamist discourses. For example, in 'The Museum' Shadia is allowed to study in Scotland because her mother maintains that a post-graduate degree will secure Shadia the respect of her in-laws and offer the possibility of a career after the marriage: "They will have the money, but you will have a degree. Don't end up like me. I left my education to marry your father and now..." (Aboulela, 2001: 105). Aboulela's texts thus support Mernissi's claim that Islam can function as a "set of psychological devices about self-empowerment and making oneself at home everywhere around the globe, in unfamiliar as well as familiar surroundings" (Mernissi in Khan, 2002: 310). Just as Islam grounds her migrant women characters with a place to stand on, its language, Arabic, surfaces in her text to assert cultural difference. Aboulela's use of language situates the critique of Orientalist/Africanist discourse in the very fabric of her texts, forcing the reader to translate between different ways of knowing and thinking.

Politics of language and nostalgic memories

Aboulela questions Western authority of understanding and authorising the 'Other', by inserting translated and untranslated Arabic words in the English text. This is one of the subtle strategies to dismantle the hegemony of English. The Arabic words become signifiers of cultural difference, invoking for the reader a source culture/religion that is to varying degrees foreign. Thus the fabric of the text signifies the different ways of viewing the world and hints at the different ways of existing in spaces like home or abroad. Cooper points out that in Aboulela's *The Translator* different knowledge bases interact on a linguistic level, signalled by

the metonymic gaps, which pepper the novel and which draw attention to themselves and alter the sound of its English. Arabic sayings, meanings, word plays and names are small

solid signposts pointing us to another culture and set of meanings, always invested in the minutiae of daily life. (Cooper, 2006)

There is an interesting correlation between the demands of the plurilingual and pluricultural text on the reader and the demands of living as migrants on the characters. Migration, or a state of being 'not home' often goes hand in hand with a distance from one's native tongue, as Suleiman points out (Suleiman, 1998: 1). Most of the text is in English, but the use of Arabic invites the reader to share the lenses that are provided. Thus the reader is forced to look at the familiar with the eyes of a stranger. There is a constant movement between utilising English and rejecting and challenging the particular way it seems to structure the world. The use of Arabic supports the latter attempt. Sometimes the Arabic is glossed, marking Aboulela's direct authorial intrusion in the text to help the reader, for example when Sammar prays the *tasbeeh*:

Her thumb counting on each segment of her fingers, three for each finger, fifteen for a hand, *Astaghfir Allah, Astaghfir Allah, Astaghfir Allah, ... I seek forgiveness from Allah ... I seek forgiveness from Allah.* (Aboulela, 1999: 32)

Aboulela explains the *tasbeeh* as a sort of "hand prayer" in which the hand substitutes a rosary. Then the words of the prayer are translated. Mostly, however, Aboulela leaves the Arabic untranslated. Readers must translate from contextual clues, look up the definitions or simply ignore the word as incomprehensible. Ashcroft et al explain this metonymic rupture in the text as a way "to signify the difference between cultures, but also [to] illustrate the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989: 64). This seems particularly applicable here, because the Arabic words stand for a cultural as well as a religious discourse that operates in the text in direct opposition to Orientalist/Africanist discourses. Most of the untranslated words are repeated and the reader gets a surer understanding of their meaning.

Aboulela's narratives and her linguistic strategies thus set up and displace hegemonic discourses which only ever partly define the subject positions her women characters occupy. Nostalgia is another such distancing strategy which frequently occurs in her fiction and which is now explored in greater detail.

A departure is the prerequisite of nostalgic memory. The ensuing distance to home, brings with it a certain scrutiny with which the past is assessed and incorporated into the present. Faqir points out that the displacement of transcultural writers forces them to "revisit their culture of origin by the essential questioning of their relationship with their body, faith, rites and languages" (Faqir, 2004: 168, emphasis added). In Aboulela's texts this revisiting happens by affirming the culture of origin in romanticised nostalgic recollections which are pitted against an alien environment in Britain. Nostalgia "(from the Greek roots *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home, a sentiment of loss and displacement" (Boym, 2001: xiii). In Aboulela's fiction, particularly in her novel *The Translator*, the alien and fragmented world of exile is countered by nostalgic dreams of rootedness and cultural tradition, which stem from the culture of origin and are fuelled by sensual memories of a youth spent in the Sudan. The contrast in the fiction between a present of dislocation and the memories of a better past allows Aboulela to use nostalgia as a tool of criticism of Western culture and as a defence mechanism against acculturation. Boym argues in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* that nostalgia is not just a longing for a place but also a "rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress" (Boym, 2001: xv).

Against this Western idea of time which is "not generous", necessitating the characters repeatedly looking at their watches, Aboulela sets the slower rhythms of a childhood in Africa, punctuated by the call of the muezzin, which represents a traditional way of structuring time that is in direct opposition to modern commodified time (Aboulela, 1999: 97). This kind of nostalgia functions early in Aboulela's narrative to "de-familiarise the Western metropolitan landscape"

(Nash, 2002: 29) and at the same time asserts a vivid sensual and spiritual texture of another location and another time:

Outside, Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just for her. She saw the sky cloudless with too many stars, imagined the night warm, warmer than indoors. She smelled dust and heard the barking of stray dogs among the street's rubble and potholes. A bicycle tinkled, frogs croaked, the *muezzin* coughed into the microphone and began the azan for the *Isha* prayer. But this was Scotland and reality left her dulled, unsure of herself. (Aboulela 1999: 19)

This bodily memory of a different place and time suggests a way of inhabiting the world that interrupts the diaspora existence of the characters. This hallucination of sensual memory, the sight of streets and sky, the feel of warm night air, the smell of dust and the hearing of the azan, frogs and a bicycle bell powerfully and tangibly inscribe cultural difference but at the same time leave the character unsure of how to deal with reality. Nostalgia therefore does not always enable the characters to form sound judgements of their new environment or even of their real homes in the source culture, as the longing and dreaming of home sometimes covers reality with a golden, rosy patina. Aboulela is aware of this particular danger of nostalgic fantasy. For this reason, she allows her character a return to her home in Khartoum, where all of a sudden, nothing is quite as fulfilling as imagined. And this is also the point at which Aboulela foregrounds the transnationality and universality of Islam. Aboulela thus uses nostalgia as a tool of criticism but then lessens its impact when it threatens to trap her characters in a position in which they find it impossible to deal with their daily reality in Britain.

Therefore we see in Aboulela's texts the shift from nostalgia to faith. This shift is not absolute however because despite Islam's transnationality, memories of home do resurface continuously and are quite clearly linked to a faith that is carried into the present via past experiences. In Sammar's hallucination in the quotation above, the memory of place is at the same time a memory of a spiritual

experience, because the call for the Isha prayer becomes a part of the nostalgic longing. The contrast between the two responses elides the fact that both seem to exist on a continuum. In faith, nostalgia is fulfilled, not by offering a geographical sense of belonging to a particular location but by stilling this longing for home in a spiritual sense. This is how Aboulela's texts envision resolution to the tensions of migration and transnational identity formation. Boym argues that this move from longing to belonging, in its foregrounding of a particular identity, can potentially put an end to a more tolerant position:

Nostalgia is paradoxical in the sense that longing can make us more empathetic towards fellow humans, yet the moment we try to repair the longing with belonging, the apprehension of loss with a *rediscovery of identity*, we often part ways [...]. (Boym, 2001: xvi, emphasis added)

Boym points here to the danger of identity politics, which often rest on divisions and exclusions. However, if one applies this to Aboulela's fiction, it becomes clear that her characters are so marginalised (in terms of race, gender and religion) that the only way to free up a space of agency lies in the claiming of an identity. If tolerance, according to Boym, requires the giving up of identity then Aboulela's characters would be annihilated in their practising of tolerance as it would mean giving up their religion, which is the one thing over which the West does not have control. Therefore, even though Boym's cautionary note remains valid, the context out of which Aboulela writes makes it necessary to claim a particular identity. In her novel *The Translator* Aboulela links her protagonist's struggle for control over her life to her complete belonging in Islam. Thus Aboulela presents the reader with an absolute discourse. This might explain the criticism the ending of her novel has generated. In contrast to the novel, the tensions of longing and belonging in her short story 'The Museum' are never resolved and thus leave enough space for unrealised possibilities. Her texts can thus be seen as sites of translational struggles over meaning and identity, which express the difficult co-existence of nostalgia and the avowal of a transnational faith.

Before considering further textual examples of nostalgia from the novel and the short stories, it will be beneficial to examine the connections between nostalgia and faith. It is useful to turn to Boym's discussion of different tonalities of nostalgia in order to explain this connection. Boym offers a typology in order to "illuminate some of nostalgia's mechanisms of seduction and manipulation" (Boym, 2001: xviii). She distinguishes between two directions nostalgic longing can take: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia is "at the core of recent national and religious revivals" as it signifies "a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment" (Boym, 2001: 49). This kind of nostalgia stresses "*nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (Boym, 2001: xviii). Restorative nostalgia protects "the absolute truth" (Boym, 2001: xviii). For Boym, this is the negative, potentially destructive and intolerant kind of nostalgia.

In contrast, reflective nostalgia is concerned with "historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude, it suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis" (Boym, 2001: 49). This kind of nostalgia therefore "dwells on the ambivalence of human longing and belonging" and "does not shy away from contradictions of modernity" and calls absolute truth into doubt (Boym, 2001: xviii). Boym's typology which disparages restorative nostalgia and approbates reflective nostalgia, offers insight into, and is critiqued by, Aboulela's fiction. Boym bases her analysis on Russian migrants who escape a totalitarian regime to find comparatively more freedom in the West. From this perspective and historical context it makes sense to caution against restorative nostalgia, which would retrospectively condone injustices and disenfranchisement that made migration necessary. Obviously Aboulela's context in which she writes about migrancy is quite different. Her nostalgia is a tool of criticism and resistance to a Western environment, which continuously inserts her migrants into an abject position. Her nostalgic vision seeks an actualisation of home in Islam and is thus caught in the absolute as it dissolves ambivalence in favour of the discourse of faith. It becomes clear then that Aboulela's particular narrative strategy in her novel *The Translator* firmly situates her narrative in Boym's

category of restorative nostalgia. It is therefore arguable that restorative nostalgia as the means to a more secure position for the migrant is not necessarily negative; on the contrary, it allows Aboulela's women migrants to voice their dissent.

In other words, Aboulela's criticism of the modern idea of time, of progress and secular living is expressed in her texts by restorative nostalgia that seeks the return to the lost/past origin. Moreover, such a restorative nostalgia aims to "reconstruct emblems and rituals of home and homeland" in order to counter emotional displacement and alienation (Boym, 2001: 41- 9). Sammar's re-enactment of rituals and traditional wear and her attempt at converting Rae can be seen as signs of the return to the origin. In order to do this, Aboulela distinguishes quite clearly between the longing for a geographical place and a spiritual home. Boym's distinction is valid and interesting but Aboulela's socio-political context merits the reevaluation of the benefits of restorative nostalgia for her revisionist aims. Aboulela's texts offer a critique of the values Boym attaches to the different kinds of nostalgia, but they do not question Boym's many useful insights into how nostalgia functions for the migrant. Examples of reflective nostalgia also appear in the texts by Mahjoub, Vassanji and Gurnah, but such nostalgia does entail a distancing from Islam. This is not an option for Aboulela, as has been emphasised.

In Aboulela's fiction, longing for place is replaced by the longing for tradition and collective mythology. Whereas the longing for place is expressed most clearly in nostalgic recollections of landscape, tastes, sounds and smells, the longing for collective mythology seeks to link these memories to Islam. Thus, the spiritual home with its promise of edenic continuity is seen as the antidote to fragmented modern time, the secular environment and particularly the insecurities of a migrant existence in the West. It is important to note that this conflation does not happen right away in her texts, which exhibit a development towards this restoration in faith via nostalgia. It is the rich texture of cultural difference with its

stubborn insistence to be read on its own terms, that characterises Aboulela's important contribution to the conversation on migration. For example, Shadia, the protagonist of 'The Museum', insists that "Europeans [have] different rules, reduced and abrupt customs", that they hate Islam and that they "are telling [...] lies in this museum" (Aboulela, 2001: 113; 112; 119). This broad critique of Western culture and its history of imperialism is possible precisely because Shadia measures her experiences in Britain with those made at home. This critique affects her perception of the landscape as well: "The Nile is superior to the Dee. I saw your Dee, *it is nothing*, it is like a stream" (Aboulela, 2001: 111, emphasis added).

Aboulela's migration stories thus invoke the African landscape in order to chart differences. In her article on women migrants in Britain, Tolia-Kelly argues convincingly that within the migrants' stories "connections to [...] region [and] lived landscapes of the past" always signify alternative ways of living and believing (Tolia-Kelly, 2004: 278). This recovery of lived landscapes of the past, or the invention of a mythical landscape in order to affirm cultural identity, is an important strategy that runs through Aboulela's novel as well as some of her short stories. For example, Aboulela repeatedly refers to the landscape of the Nile in contrast to the everyday environment of her characters in Britain. These places of emotional importance are expressed with the glow of nostalgic longing. Boym suggests that the nostalgic imagery is always invested with fantasy as it tries to superimpose "home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life" (Boym, 2001: xiv). As a consequence of this superimposition the texts present interstices that subtly interrogate nostalgic vision and call its authority and accuracy into question. When Aboulela's migrants return home, they are confronted with a present that shatters some of their harmonious and idealised visions of such a homecoming. At these points in the texts nostalgia is breaking down in face of concrete reality. Restorative nostalgia ceases when the spiritual home has been rebuilt. Boym sees the connection between nostalgia and

spirituality in the convergence of longing for a home that is both physical and spiritual. Nostalgia then functions as the

mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history. (Boym, 2001: 8)

In Aboulela's fiction nostalgia becomes muted in the experience of Islam as a spiritual home and the physical homelessness becomes less acute because of the spiritual feeling of belonging. The migrant realises that home can be a state of mind/faith rather than a connection to a particular place. Aboulela charts this process in her novel *The Translator* mainly, through the romantic relationship of the main protagonists, but there are signs of it in most of her short stories as well.

The implications of this development from nostalgia to absolute faith for the translatory practices that try to bridge the cultural divides embedded in the novel are fascinating. The characters' nostalgic longing for home and faith causes them to pass value judgements on their host culture. Thus the text foregrounds the ideological framework of the source culture and subtly offers a critique of existing relations of power in the Western environment. Nostalgia and faith afford the characters a certain sense of pride and independence, as they critically evaluate their new surroundings with non-western eyes. This critical evaluation, as Tolia-Kelly established in interviews with East African women in Britain, incorporates memories of the physical landscape of East Africa, the air, the smells and other recollections of the senses (Tolia-Kelly, 2004: 284). Sammar, the protagonist of *The Translator*, often remembers with her five senses and this is characteristic for the nostalgic, as Boym points out:

The nostalgic [...] has an amazing capacity for remembering sensations, tastes, sounds, smells, the minutiae and trivia of the lost paradise that those who remained home never noticed. (Boym, 2001: 4)

Aboulela's fiction is full of these sensual nostalgic moments. At first, Sammar experiences physical exile in Scotland very negatively. She is far from her (adopted) family, has lost her husband in such a strange place and is constantly reminded that she is different, that she somehow does not belong. In her moving exploration of the meaning of exile, Hoffman declares that exile can deprive the subject of access to the radically different surroundings by "draining the world not only of significance but of its colours, striations, nuances, its very existence" (Hoffman, 1989: 107). Aboulela repeatedly refers to this point of exilic near-annihilation of her characters, both in her short stories and in the novel. In *The Translator* this comes out very clearly when one looks at Sammar's reactions to her environment – British physical and social landscape are seen as completely opposite to the territories of the past in Africa.

In *The Translator*, Scottish culture is initially alien and often threatening for Sammar, who is working as an Arabic translator for a British university. Following the sudden death of her husband, estranged from her young son who stays behind in Khartoum, Sammar drifts – grieving and isolated – until she finds herself falling in love with Rae, a Scottish academic, for whom she translates. Twice divorced and a self-proclaimed cynic, to Sammar he seems to come from another world. They are separated by culture and faith, but drawn to each other. Whenever Sammar meets Rae, she has a nostalgic vision. This is Aboulela's fictional device to alert the reader that despite their differences, they might share more than they initially think.

The Scotland of this novel, at least initially, is a cold, colourless and hostile place, where Sammar, in an effort to keep anxiety at bay, can only resort to nostalgia. Sammar experiences lack of colours and smells as well as an unsettling insecurity of her own place in such a world. The metropolitan landscape is de-familiarised and simply walking through streets becomes a maze of culture shocks:

Things that jarred - an earring on a man's earlobe, a woman walking with a dog big enough to swallow the infant she was at the same time pushing in a pram, the huge billboards on the roads: Wonderbra, cigarette ads that told people to smoke and not to smoke at the same time, the Ministry of Sin nightclub housed in a former church. (Aboulela, 1999: 62)

The surprise and slight disapproval with which Sammar registers these unfamiliar cultural codes prove that she clearly distances herself. These codes act as cultural barriers. Sammar cannot get used to the weather and experiences it as an element hostile towards her personally. Tolia-Kelly points out that

Arrival and adjustment are just as much about adjustment to climate as they are about making a home in a new nation. The shift in physical environment influences [women migrants] psychologically and physically; the weather is a feature of their isolation and a feature of the obstacles they have to overcome to sustain day-to-day living. (Tolia-Kelly, 2004: 286)

Aboulela charts this adjustment to climate through Sammar's struggle to adapt. She finds it difficult to get to work in the darkness of winter (Aboulela, 1999: 31). Every time she faces wind, rain or snow it becomes a major personal challenge. In discussing the English weather, Bhabha points out that "the heat and dust of India; the dark emptiness of Africa" serve as the "daemonic double" (Bhabha, 1994: 169). Aboulela reverses this common trope in her fiction, where the Northern weather acts as a physical sign of the dangers of migration:

She was afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow, which came to this country, afraid of the wind even. At such times she would stay indoors and wait.... (Aboulela, 1999: 3)

The weather influences the colours and Sammar laments the fact that everything is always grey and almost colourless: "a world dim with inevitable rain, metallic blue, dull green" (Aboulela, 1999: 24) but the lack of colour is just a visible sign of other, more important differences:

She said that colours made her sad. Yellow as she knew it and green as she knew it were not here, not bright and vivid as they should be. She had stacked the differences; *the weather, the culture, modernity, the language, the silence of the muezzin*, then found that the colours of mud, sky and leaves, were different too. (Aboulela, 1999: 39, emphasis added)

In this quote the text charts the more tangible differences of everyday life, like the weather and the colours, in order to frame the differences that are at the heart of Sammar's cultural and geographical displacement: the concept of modern time and secular living. These differences are registered in the text as absences: the lack of time, the lack of understanding and communication, the lack of the call for prayer, the lack of a community of faith. Just like Sammar misses vibrant colours, she finds that Scotland does not have many smells. Her senses are not stimulated and this lack reinforces her isolation. When she translates the Al-Nidaa manuscript she notices a stain that looks like beans mashed with oil. Immediately she falls into a nostalgic reverie where she imagines the smell of "beans cooked in the way she had known long ago, with cumin and olive oil" (Aboulela, 1999: 5). In her grief she lets food rot in her fridge but it does not smell:

Things do not have a smell in this part of the world. If she had been back home, she would not have been able to be neglectful for so long and the ants and the cockroaches would not have left her in peace. (Aboulela, 1999: 59)

In her collection of short stories, *Coloured Lights* (2001), we find many instances of sensual nostalgia in face of the harsh reality of Britain. For example, in 'The Ostrich' the female protagonist Sumra muses that "in Khartoum I felt everything was real and our life in London a hibernation" and that she is "a stranger suddenly appearing on the stage with no part to play, no lines to read" (Aboulela, 2001: 39-45). This image of an actor on the stage in the wrong play, without a part, brings to mind feelings of acute embarrassment and a sense of placelessness reminiscent of a nightmare. Aboulela therefore highlights that the

dislocation of her migrant characters disallows them their grasp on the reality of their environment. This is invoked by words like hibernation, dreams and hallucinations, which leave her characters alienated. Zygmunt Bauman in his essay on 'Assimilation into Exile' comments on this sense of being in a place that is unreal:

Thus, exile is a place of compulsory confinement, but also an *unreal* place, a place that is itself out of place in the order of things. Anything may happen here, but nothing can be done here. What makes the exile an *unreal* place is the daily effort to make it real – that is to cleanse it of all things that are out of place. (Bauman, 1998: 321, emphasis added)

Bauman suggests that one way of making the new environment real is to assimilate, a radical form of cultural translation that seeks to erase difference in favour of conformity. Aboulela rejects this possibility in her texts. Her migrants, because of their spiritual identity, do not have this option. Instead Aboulela charts their culture shock.

For example, Shadia in 'The Museum' thinks to herself: "I should not be here; there was nothing for her here. She wanted to see minarets, boats fragile on the Nile" (Aboulela, 2001: 117). In the story 'Souvenirs' Manaal visits Aberdeen and literally hibernates in reaction to the different environment: "Then, as if lost in the cold, his sister hibernated, slept and slept through the nights and large parts of the days" (Aboulela, 2001: 18). The protagonist of 'Coloured Lights' sits in the bus in London and starts crying: "I was crying for Taha or maybe because I was homesick, not only for my daughters or my family but sick with longing for the heat, the sweat and the water of the Nile" (Aboulela, 2001: 1). The most emphatic passage in the short stories is where Shadia thinks about Scotland's cold: "Hell is not only a blazing fire, a part of it is freezing cold, torturous ice and snow. In Scotland's winter you live a glimpse of this unseen world, feel the breath of it in your bones" (Aboulela, 2001: 118). The opposites of warmth, colour and life in Africa against the cold, bland and unreal life in England/Scotland becomes

a key structuring device of Aboulela's fiction and this dichotomy finds its most significant pair in the faith-secular binary. One can see this particularly well in the short story 'The Boy from the Kebab Shop'.

'The Boy from the Kebab Shop' illustrates how strategic restorative nostalgia works to propel Aboulela's characters towards Islam. Metaphors around food abound in this story where physical nourishment is an expression of spiritual nourishment found in Islam. Dina, a teenager, lives with her westernised and constantly dieting mother, who has lost her ties to Islam. She meets Kassim, who works in a Kebab shop and is very serious about his faith. The food that he offers Dina becomes a promise of succulence and well-being that she could attain should she decide to let his way of life influence her own. Aboulela carefully constructs opposites in this story, where dieting, bitterness and loneliness represent Dina's western home and where succulence, intimacy, vulnerability and community are an alternative life represented by Kassim and Islam. The last sentence of the story expresses this clearly: "She [Dina] paused on the pavement, hesitating between the succulent mystic life he promised, and the peckish unfulfilment of her parent's home" (Aboulela, 2001: 71). The scene evokes a promise of restorative nostalgia, where longing can be stilled in a spiritual sense and offer a physical home. This promise is also linked in the text to a restoring of identity, as Dina "was not an outsider today, not a customer, but one of 'them', pushing open a private door, as if she were Samia, as if she was part of the family too" (Aboulela, 2001: 69). The imagery of the open door and the joining of a family are expressive of Aboulela's narrative aim: displacement and alienation cease when faith is accepted.

The sharing of food also becomes significant in the novel *The Translator*, when Sammar brings soup to Rae when he is ill. The nourishment points beyond the physical to a spiritual dimension: "She had made soup for him. [...]. Her feelings were in the soup" (Aboulela, 1999: 86). Aboulela refers to the soup later in the plot when in response to Rae's statement that the soup made him well, Sammar

replies that “‘Allah is the one who heals.’ She wanted him to look beyond the causes to the First, the Real” (Aboulela, 1999: 90). The longing for a home, for nourishment and other sensual signs is then only a deferral, a hesitation on the way to a spiritual home. The preserved culture of offering food gains significance in a British environment, where the everyday gesture becomes a sign of belonging. It is not surprising that one reviewer refers to Aboulela’s fiction as *halaal*, using a term for food to suggest a general spiritual wholesomeness (Faqr, 2004: 170).

It is obvious then that Scotland, in contrast to Khartoum, is a place where Sammar feels she does not belong: “this has nothing to do with me, these shops, these people have nothing to do with me, this sky is not for me” (Aboulela, 1999: 91). In this last statement Scottish culture is perceived as a complete opposite to home.

In response to the realisation that there is no community into which Sammar fits easily in Scotland, she again turns her attention homewards – longing for the community that was left behind. Boym insists that the search for, and resurrection of home, is a collective effort, for “unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (Boym, 2001: xvi). Aboulela expresses this collective aspect of Islam, showing that Sammar’s faith is also a connection to community and landscape:

When she stood her shoulders brushed against the women at each side of her, straight lines, then bending together but not precisely at the same time, not slick, not synchronised, but rippled and the rustle of clothes until their foreheads rested on the mats. *Under the sky, the grass underneath it, it was a different feeling from praying indoors, a different glow. She remembers having to hide in Aberdeen, being alone.* (Aboulela, 1999: 146, my emphasis)

However, this idyllic scene is broken by the alienation Sammar suffers at home from her family, particularly her mother-in-law and her aunt, Mehasen. It is not very different from the alienation of Scotland. Through this, Aboulela distances herself from Sammar's nostalgia, exposing its limitations in its inability to marry dream to reality. It is at this point in the narrative that the nostalgia for the left-behind place of the exile changes to become a longing for a different life. This new life is centred around faith and Sammar's union with Rae rather than the absence of home in its geographical sense, muting feelings of nostalgia:

'I thought you were homesick,' he finally said, 'and this anti-terrorist project would be a chance for you to go on to Khartoum, see your son. Maybe I made a mistake in suggesting it...' 'It wasn't a mistake. *I was homesick for the place, how everything looked. But I don't know what kind of sickness it would be, to be away from you.*' (Aboulela, 1999: 113, my emphasis)

The closer Sammar gets to departure, the more she questions her nostalgia for home: "She thought of going home, seeing home again, its colours again and in spite of years of yearning, all she had now was reluctance and some fear" (Aboulela, 1999: 87). Aboulela suggests through this foreboding, that turns out to be quite accurate, that homecoming is not necessarily the solution to the nostalgic's longing for a home. In this she agrees with Boym, who points out that nostalgic love for a place "can only survive as a long-distance relationship" and that when images of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life are forced together into a single image, "it breaks the frame" (Boym, 2001: xiv). Meaning that homecoming shatters the nostalgic dream of the past.

When Sammar travels to Khartoum to visit her family, the image of the nurturing home cannot be upheld and the reader is left with the fragments of her earlier nostalgia. The attempt to superimpose past and present, reality and dream fails and the text questions restorative nostalgia. Her mother-in-law blames Sammar for the death of her son and she expresses this with looks of resentment and an attitude of contempt (Aboulela, 1999: 129). Interestingly Sammar seems to

internalise this attitude: “how long would it be before she started to look like she *should* look, a dried-out widow, a faded figure in the background?” (Aboulela, 1999: 135) Being at home does not provide a caring and nourishing community. Shortly after her husband’s death Sammar is willing to marry the old Ahmad Ali Yassen who claims to feel a duty towards widows and is an old family acquaintance (Aboulela, 1999: 12). But her mother-in-law intervenes and shouts at Sammar:

An educated girl like you, you know English...you can support yourself and your son, you don't need marriage. What do you need it for? He started to talk to me about this and I silenced him. I shamed him the old fool. He can take his religiousness and build a mosque but keep away from us. (Aboulela, 1999: 12, emphasis in original)

In this passage, Aboulela critiques the patriarchal structures imbedded in religious tradition and subtly asserts female autonomy by saying that whereas widows needed protection in the past, Sammar’s economic situation is different and therefore the old rule does not apply to her any more. However, this positive reading needs to be qualified since Mehasen comes to Sammar’s aid mainly because she wants her to provide for her grandson and possibly for her wider family by continuing to work in Britain even after the death of Sammar’s husband. This is evident by the list that Mehasen sends of things she wants Sammar to bring to Khartoum:

The letter was brief, with an attached list of things that her aunt wanted her to bring. Items from the pharmacy: paracetamol, laxatives, biscuits for diabetes. Also Hanan had just had a baby and seemed to need the whole of Mothercare. Then there were things for Amir: clothes, roller blades. Roller blades? [...] Her aunt must imagine that she was making millions, [...]. (Aboulela, 1999: 77)

Mehasen’s motivation for stopping the marriage is therefore more determined by self-interest than by a genuine concern for Sammar’s well being. The letter directly addresses this: “I am so glad you seem to have got rid of this ridiculous idea of getting married again – when you see Amir,[...], you will not have the

hard heart to be so selfish" (Aboulela, 1999: 77). This covert cruelty towards Sammar recurs repeatedly in the section where she returns to Khartoum, culminating in a terrible fight in which her mother-in-law accuses her of not contributing financially and of killing her son:

'You killed my son,' Mehasen had actually spoken those words out loud. Now on her face there was a kind of triumph[...]. 'You nagged him for that car and that car killed him. He wrote and said, "Please Mama, help me, Sammar's getting on my nerves, saying it's cold [...]. Then I sent him the money.'" (Aboulela, 1999: 156)

Home ceases to be at this instant and it is telling that Aboulela writes about Sammar feeling cold at this moment, just as she did in Aberdeen. All the sensual reassurance that her location offers her: the heat, rich colours, familiar smells and the sound of the muezzin do not constitute belonging or nourishment. It is here that Aboulela dismantles nostalgia and instead proposes faith as the only way to belong, independently of the physical location in which the characters find themselves. There are indications of this realisation that one can belong independently of the location if one has faith even before Sammar returns home. It is in Scotland where cultural barriers become permeable once she falls in love with Rae, a scholar of the Middle East at Aberdeen University, who is familiar with Islam.

In other words, Aboulela asserts that the foreign culture becomes intelligible when Sammar recognises herself in it, or rather she recognises her own cultural norms that are inscribed in it through a particular discursive strategy. In this case Islam functions as such a discursive strategy, which provides her with a place she can claim as her own within the foreign culture. It is this discourse that provides the matrix for her understanding of Scottish culture.

For example, when Rae falls ill, Sammar hears the news from Diane, one of his students, who casually remarks that he is in hospital. Sammar gets angry about Diane's 'callousness':

When someone is taken ill, when there is bad news, there are certain things that must be said, a sympathetic word, a good wish for them. When that person is someone older than you, your professor, someone who helps you, then you should be doubly respectful. (Aboulela, 1999: 68)

Sammar's own background and understanding of the appropriate way to talk about a person of authority influence her judgement of Diane. However, on Diane's cultural terms, her relationship with her supervisor is friendly but detached and her remark cannot be regarded as callous. Sammar has a similar reaction to Mhairi's card for Rae, which says "Get Well Soon, Dad", again without "I wish" or "I pray" (Aboulela, 1999: 92). What seems to be bothering Sammar in both instances is the lack of a spiritual dimension, to which the wish of recovery for Rae can be directed. However, from Mhairi's perspective, the card expresses love, concern and the sincere wish that Rae gets better. Aboulela manages to portray different versions of reality, which intersect in her text and thus make Sammar's world and her (mis)translations transparent to the reader.

Aboulela, in refusing a tragic ending for her story, portrays counter-acculturation culminating in Rae's conversion to Islam and it is through this conversion that she translates asymmetrical power relations in this novel. Writing a story in which the white man returns to the African woman on her terms certainly addresses issues of gender and race. However, in order to lessen the cultural gap between the characters and to make her narrative more credible, Aboulela creates in Rae a "modern Orientalist for whom Islam is not a threat" and who tries to reverse the imperial past by his academic contributions about the Gulf war (Nash, 2002: 30). When Sammar asks him why he studied Islam, he replies tellingly:

I wanted to understand the Middle East. No one writing in the fifties and sixties predicted Islam would play such a significant part in the politics of the area. Even Fanon, who I have always admired, had no insight into the religious feelings of the North Africans he wrote about. He never made the link between Islam and anti-colonialism. (Aboulela, 1999: 97)

Interestingly, as Nash remarks, in “attributing the discourse of postcolonial politics” to Rae and Yasmin, her British Asian colleague, Aboulela creates the space for Sammar’s faith that is positioned above politics (Nash, 2002: 30). The narrative culminates in Rae’s move from postcolonial politics to the acceptance of faith.

In other words, Rae must cease being a foreigner, necessitating a complete cultural shift. It is very important for Sammar that Rae, having lived some time in Africa and having knowledge about Islam, can understand where she is coming from. This is crucial: through Rae, in whom she identifies her own cultural values, Scottish culture becomes accessible. Only with him can she imagine living there and being happy. This move to appropriate cultural difference into a familiar frame of reference is inscribed in the narrative. For example, Rae is set apart from other Scottish men because he has a dark complexion:

Rae looked like he could easily pass for a Turk or Persian. He had told her once that in Morocco he could walk as if disguised. Here with others, he looked *out of place*, not only because of his looks but his manners. (Aboulela, 1999: 6, emphasis added)

Sammar has a propensity to make Rae into something familiar, when in fact he is not. He looks like a Turk or Persian although he is neither. This need to set him apart from other Scots and liken him to her own background, makes it possible for Sammar to fall in love with him, to talk to him. He is the cause for some of Sammar’s nostalgic visions, thus Aboulela suggests that he offers a sense of home in the foreign environment. It is directly after visiting his flat with Yasmin that Sammar realises “*Home had come here*. ‘Rae is different,’ Sammar said. ‘He is sort of familiar, like people from back home’” (Aboulela, 1999: 19, emphasis added).

Yasmin, matter-of-factly disagrees and says that “he’s an orientalist. It’s an occupational hazard” (Aboulela, 1999: 19). Through Yasmin’s position, Aboulela

allows a more realistic evaluation of the situation in the sense that Rae is allowed to be himself rather than representing somebody he is not. Yasmin's cautious voice is devoid of any nostalgia and it is not surprising that Sammar does not want to hear it. Sammar also sees their difference ("they lived in worlds divided by simple facts – religion, country of origin, race – data that fills forms" (Aboulela, 1999: 29)) but she always emphasises Rae's ability to join exile and home:

From the beginning she had thought that *he was not one of them*, not modern like them, not impatient like them. He talked to her as if she had not lost anything, as if she were the same Sammar of a *past time*. (Aboulela, 1999: 29-30, emphasis added)

The wish to return to the past, to repeat the unrepeatable is an important characteristic of Aboulela's protagonist and Sammar is very often engaged in restoring a past that will enable a different future for her. It is therefore important that she and Rae share an origin, their place of birth, because Sammar was born in England and only returned to Khartoum when she was seven, "like him Africa was arrived at and loved" (Aboulela, 1999: 40). When Rae comes to Khartoum to fetch her, she knows that for her it is easier to translate Scotland and be with Rae than to stay in Khartoum without him: "She had been given the chance and she had not been able to substitute her country for him, anything for him" (Aboulela, 1999: 179). However her translation is only possible because of Rae's conversion, his translating Islam into faith. Only then they share a discourse and an identity.

Mudimbe talks about the "politics of conversion" in regards to missionary activity in Zaire, which is historically and politically completely different from the story in Aboulela's novel. However one idea of his analysis is useful here. When the convert assumes the "identity of a style" he or she becomes a candidate for assimilation (Mudimbe, 1994: 109). With identity of a style, Mudimbe means "the speech communicating a spirituality [that] refers itself to an absolute truth" (Mudimbe, 1994: 109). This speech depends on a "normative discourse, already given, definitely fixed"; not one that seeks a dialogue but one claiming the

“authority of the truth” (Mudimbe, 1988: 47). Aboulela inscribes into the novel exactly that: a complete conversion that by its religious nature positions one discourse over and above all others. What is so interesting is that the ‘missionary’ in this story is an Arab African woman and her discourse explicitly discusses non-European processes of converting the European. Thus Aboulela is addressing and re-writing asymmetrical power relations between the female cultural Other and the Western academic elite. Orientalist/Africanist discourse loses its authority in her narrative. The narrative takes the reader along this process of conversion to make it seem natural; the reader is initiated into the identity of style alongside the characters. Aboulela’s feminised Islamic discourse creates a positive space for her female protagonist Sammar, who clearly negotiates her own positioning within cross-cultural encounters (Nash, 2002: 28). Rae’s conversion constitutes the least subtle narrative device of this novel. And Faqir finds this ending “unconvincing” (Faqir, 2004: 170). However, even though Aboulela’s inter-faith and cross-cultural project might be considered didactic, it certainly proposes creative new identities that are a product of transcultural imagination. It suggests that the African migrant does not have to assimilate to the host country but might be able to carve out a space of her own.

During his illness, Rae feels the need to pray but he does not know how and one notes that he does not have a natural approach to religion. It is not part of his discourse for in his Christian upbringing, religion and history were reduced to “fairy-tales” (Aboulela, 1999: 91). Aboulela’s wording here positions the discourse of absolute truth against one of fairy-tales. Rae seems to be surprised by the impulse to pray: “I was a little taken aback. I didn’t think of myself as someone who would turn spiritual” (Aboulela, 1999: 180). Before Sammar confronts him about his faith she muses: “If Rae said no what exile would he put himself in?” (Aboulela, 1999: 112). Again it is very clear that ‘exile’ is an extremely negative, disabling space in this novel, and that applies to the physical exile of Sammar as well as the spiritual exile of Rae before conversion. Even though Rae would not consider himself being in exile, in retrospect he seems to agree with Sammar’s

view, for he says when he comes to Khartoum to fetch her: "It [conferences, the separation, life] burned me up. All this running for nothing" (Aboulela, 1999: 180). These reasons do seem to indicate a crisis and therefore it is not surprising that the people at work attribute his conversion to a "mid-life crisis" (Aboulela, 1999: 181), a common interpretation within their particular cultural frame of reference. However, Aboulela dismisses this reason and through Rae asserts:

'What I regret most,' he said, 'is that I used to write things like' "Islam gives dignity to those who otherwise would not have dignity in their lives", as if I didn't need dignity myself.' (Aboulela, 1999: 180)

This quotation emphasises again that only within the exclusive discourse of Islamic faith is it possible for the characters to attain dignity. Rae's professional knowledge about Islam becomes something personal and to both characters it is clear that this conversion is a gift brought about by Allah without much agency on Rae's part: "I found out at the end, that it didn't have anything to do with how much I've read or how many facts I've learned about Islam" (Aboulela, 1999: 180). Rae then, has translated himself, adopting a different cultural discourse in order to marry Sammar.

Translating back: Conclusion

Aboulela's narrative solution to bridge the interstice of different cultures and languages between Sammar and Rae is presented as a coming together, a mutual understanding, but the underlying tensions also reveal a contact zone. Aboulela's translation appropriates the host culture for the sake of the source culture, which is invested with more authority, owing to its religious nature. Therefore, the strength of this novel lies in the nuanced descriptions, which question and de-familiarise British life and the surprising reversal of power positions between the main characters, where the female Arab-African convinces and converts the white male academic. The text accomplishes "a reversal of the

Orientalism of the imperial past” as well as the reversal of some gender stereotypes (Nash, 2002: 30). Therefore the novel creates a “feminised space”, which questions Western cultural imperialism but also seeks to define an Islamic discourse that enables the woman protagonist to find a highly unconventional home. The limitations of Aboulela’s narrative solutions are also clear. For some readers, the promotion of faith as the vehicle for cross-cultural understanding might not be convincing as it leaves little room for negotiation.

While the nostalgia in the texts mourns distances and disconnection between place, time and the spiritual, Aboulela repeatedly reminds the reader that finding a home and belonging is possible even in movement. Home, as we have seen, is a state of mind rather than a geographical location. At the same time Aboulela insists on the importance of left-behind places, of remembered territories that help ground the characters’ sense of self in an alien landscape. The sensory memory of colour, texture, smell and sound which Aboulela describes with such nuanced detail serve to engage the “presence of other time spaces that assist in being, dwelling and identification with place, home and landscape” (Tolia-Kelly, 2004: 285). Thus these sensory memories are not only a context of the past but they place and situate the character in a particular present. There is a dialogic connection, so much part of a post-colonial social space, between contemporary environments of migration and the memories of other landscapes. Aboulela’s fiction illustrates how these other landscapes offer a matrix for evaluation of the Western metropole, the understanding of modern time and the secular. Islam provides the characters with an identity with which they can negotiate a space of their own in an often hostile environment.

The next chapter follows Mahjoub’s migrants, who struggle to reconcile their experiences of migration and new knowledges gained with an increasingly fanatical religious establishment in the Sudan. Where Aboulela perceives Islam as a positive space for personal growth, Mahjoub critiques religious power as instrumental in oppressing knowledge and systems of good governance.

Chapter Three

Translation, Scholarly Knowledge and the Reader in Jamal Mahjoub's *Wings of Dust* (1994) and *The Carrier* (1998)

Centuries ago the old astronomers peered up at the faint spots that illuminated the heavens. They constructed mathematics and geometrics in the efforts to pinpoint the place where the key to all our souls are hidden. We are still no closer to the truth than they were but we have more maps. (Mahjoub, 1996: 63)

Jamal Mahjoub's contribution to the conversation in this thesis about migrancy, translation and writing focuses on two things which will be discussed in this chapter: Firstly, his narratives interrogate the possibility of migrants using translation as a way to transmit scholarly knowledge across cultural, linguistic and religious boundaries. For Mahjoub, the transmission of knowledge functions as an antidote against ignorance and opens up spaces of transformation where communities of scholars form across cultural boundaries. These unexpected connections and moments of understanding are the precious gains of cultural translation. However, these translations cannot be sustained within the narratives, as the societies in which the characters operate are resisting transformation. The knowledge the characters gain threatens the status quo and thus results in the intervention of power. Secondly, whereas the characters in the narratives are crushed and severely curtailed in their attempts at translation, Mahjoub accords a special role to the reader of his fiction. The reader is invited to participate in the cultural translation begun in the narratives but reaching beyond the confines of the text. Mahjoub is very explicit about this, as he maintains that the social transformation withheld from the characters can possibly be enacted in the space between reader and text.

In his lecture "On Globalism" Mahjoub speaks of transcultural literature demanding more of reader and writer, because it does not allow for identification

with a particular group. As Mahjoub points out in the opening quote of the introduction of this thesis, in the spheres between the reader and the writer lies the potential of change; for “where there was once only monochrome light, now there is a spectrum of colours” (Mahjoub, 1997: 5).

Mahjoub’s metaphor here is about enlightenment, about seeing other cultures not in one light but perceiving the striations of difference. The interest here is in the way he links his metaphor quite explicitly to the translation processes between the cultures of the text and those of the reader. This also explains why he does not offer a narrative resolution for his characters. The narrator’s hope of creating a space of honesty, compassion and rebellion is only complete when the reader joins in the task of cultural translation. Mahjoub thus emphasises the reader’s active participation in the creation of meaning of a literary text. The reader “negotiates” the text (von Wilpert, 1989: 769). If a reader does not share the cultural background of the writer the potential for cultural translation is even greater. This builds on Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism: all language and thus all literary texts are addressed to a receiver and meaning emerges in the relationship, social and ideological, between text and reader (Bakhtin, 1983: 114).

In other words, intercultural literature is translational because it manages to “link diverse cultures which are now, for better or worse, stuck with one another and whose encounter now defines the world we live in” (Mahjoub, 1997: 6). In a lecture titled “Fiction, Reality and the Fear of Flying”, delivered in Denmark after 9/11, Mahjoub proposes the writing and reading of literature as an alternative to contemporary practices of representation of Others.

The way literature provides insight into other lives is through the reading process in which “we allow ourselves to become someone else” (Mahjoub, 2002: 9). Thus fiction “takes us into other worlds, other people’s lives, other cultural contexts, and shows us something of the human condition which is common to all”

(Mahjoub, 2002: 9). This approach to textual analysis, which focuses on the scope of negotiation on the part of the reader, is called reception theory (Antor, 1998: 458). Reception theory stresses that the meaning of the text is located somewhere between the text and a particular reader (Antor, 1998: 458). This takes into account that issues of hermeneutics, the way to read and interpret, is a two-way process where the claim of the text is mediated by the reader's frame of reference. Shohat points out that this is particularly important in a colonial situation where

an active exchange of words and looks, whether in colonial Egypt or India, or in present-day Times Square movie theatres, turns public spectatorship [readership] into a discursive battle zone, where members of the audience actively negotiate "looking relations" between communities. (Shohat in Hawley, 1998: 25)

Shohat's application of reception theory to visual texts does lend some explicatory power to my argument as well, because the way a culture is read and interpreted also hinges on this negotiation of relations between communities. In Mahjoub's fiction the relations comprise immigrant communities (and individual migrants) that inhabit the fictional space and proffer their stories to the respective readers. Stressing the importance of fiction as an avenue of intercultural encounter, Mahjoub maintains that only fiction can "breach that gap which objectifies the Other" (Mahjoub, 2002: 8). The prerequisites of such intercultural literature are translation and the transmission of knowledge.

Wings of Dust (1994) and *The Carrier* (1998) both focus on translation of scholarly knowledge as a way to document existing intercultural linkages and to create new ones, even if only temporarily. Reading, however, can extend this short life-span of these wonderful instances of cross-cultural translations if the reader engages with the narratives. Reading frees one, Mahjoub argues, from the positions of "objective viewers" or "amateur anthropologists" in the encounter of cultural difference, and inserts one instead as a "human being" in the dialogue with the text (Mahjoub, 2002: 9). Whereas Mahjoub expects much from his

readers, both novels show that the relations of power within which the protagonists have to operate restrict and at times directly prevent such translations.

"All knowledge in these dark times is dangerous"

Mahjoub investigates in his fiction the Foucauldian knowledge/power construct. What Young defines as Foucault's "distrust of totalizing systems of knowledge" is echoed in Mahjoub's narratives (Young, 1990: 9). In *Wings of Dust*, Mahjoub critiques Shari'a law which prevents both protagonists, Sharif Turab and Shibshib, from contributing their scholarly knowledge to the political transformation of the Sudan after independence. What Mahjoub reveals is the destructive force of religious authority when it is institutionally linked to state power. Thus we see a conflation of the critiques against the misuse of religious authority with unethical practices of state authority. Interestingly, this critique shifts to Christianity in the 17th century plotline of *The Carrier*, where the knowledge of the Copernican revolution comes directly into conflict with the religious teachings of both Islam and the Catholic Church. In opposition to knowledge production as a form of domination, Mahjoub focuses on singular acts of translation, where spaces of knowledge production open up links between cultures in a way that is beneficial and not hierarchical. These more egalitarian spaces connect African and Western knowledge. Mahjoub endorses the postcolonial critique of the equation of knowledge with "what is called Western thought" (Young, 1990: 17). In *The Carrier* particularly, Mahjoub makes the point that Western science does not have the monopoly on knowledge production.

The central question that Mahjoub's narratives poses is what happens to translators of knowledge in the context of Western imperialism, racism and religious/state power (Cooper, 2006). Trying to manoeuvre and translate within these forces of power, Mahjoub's bravest characters often fail but they

nevertheless are inspired to transmit and hold on to knowledge of other worlds gained through translation:

They are all driven by a dream, something that is connected with that truth beyond. Their own lives, and ultimately their failure, reflect in a way the possibility of what they were striving for, what they were dreaming of: a transformation of the society they are living in, or of themselves. (Mahjoub in Sévry 2001: 88)

Their failure therefore, as Brenda Cooper points out in regard to the protagonist of *The Carrier* but which I want to extend to *Wings of Dust*, lies in their underestimation of the “workings of power and how [...] knowledge, when it threatens deeply entrenched privilege, will be suppressed” (Cooper, 2006). But this refusal to ignore the threat of intervention by authority also makes them into the admirable and obstinate carriers that the reader comes to appreciate. They are the dreamers, scientists and translators of Mahjoub texts that at least temporarily delay the dystopic outcomes of the narratives. It is through them that Mahjoub insists on showing the reader the possibility of connections across boundaries, even if these connections are not sustainable despite the character’s best efforts.

The Carrier allows more space for pockets of connection and communication than Mahjoub’s earlier novel *Wings of Dust*. In this novel knowledge is increasingly at odds with the politics of the Sudan, so that at the end of the book, just before being exiled, the narrator, Sharif, finds himself in prison with “lecturers from the university, teachers, civil servants, ex-diplomats, all kinds, in fact *anyone who was capable of thinking for himself* – poets and writers, even popular singers” (Mahjoub 1994: 212, emphasis added).

Wings of Dust portrays the postcolonial and increasingly farcical national politics, which the narrator evaluates from his exile and isolation in France with a deep seated melancholy. Whereas Heinesen and Rashid, the protagonists of the later novel, *The Carrier*, are perhaps more willing to take risks in their pursuit of

knowledge, the narrator of *Wings of Dust* has resigned himself to “sticking to what I know and can rely on and God knows there’s little enough of that in the world today” (Mahjoub, 1994: 1). This tone of resignation is a result of the narrative being told as a memoir after the protagonist’s cruel and crushing encounters with state power in the form of imprisonment and subsequent exile. The statement highlights that Sharif’s attempts at using his knowledge have been thwarted and punished by corrupt state authority so that the only safe knowledge relates to minute details of his daily routine. However, the memories of Sharif’s life open up more hopeful spaces within the general tone of despair. In what Mohsen describes as “a cultural landscape of suspicion and dread”, translation nevertheless opens minimal spaces for connection (Mohsen, 2000: 5). Those translators who try to build connections are “thrown into madness or exile if we were lucky, into the grave if we were not” (Mahjoub, 1994: 155). The narrator is thus lucky: from exile we hear his story about differences in the Sudan that were too varied to be translated into a common humanity.

Whereas in *The Carrier* Mahjoub deals mostly with scientific facts and knowledges transmitted by past scientists and old manuscripts, which are thus imbued with a certain amount of tangibility and verifiability, *Wings of Dust* talks about knowledge associated with the humanities – literature, poetry and politics. The scientific knowledge translated in *The Carrier* is by its nature transnational and it is clearly suggested by the text that the coming together of African and European knowledge benefits science and the characters’ personal lives. Conversely, in *Wings of Dust* national politics are characterised by contrasting and conflicting ideals and knowledges due to the Sudan’s different cultures, languages, religions and ethnic backgrounds. This ‘negative’ difference affects the text on all levels:

Emulating the turmoil and uncertainty of the Sudan [Mahjoub’s] writing distinguishes itself by its dynamism: landscapes are in constant motion; the identities of protagonists are often ambiguous or in constant mutation; history and past are open-ended, holding within

their narratives a wealth of interpretations and meanings; narrative style shifts [...]; the traditional framework of the novel is subverted by the fragment. (Mohsen 2000: 1)

What Mohsen points out so perceptively in the above quotation is that these fragments on the textual level are symptoms of a fragmented society where the task of translation between groups is so enormous that it spirals out of control for the protagonists. Their modest attempts at creating spaces of honesty and compassion by sharing their scholarly knowledge in the tumultuous years after independence fail because corruption, religious fundamentalism and suspicion between cultural groupings create further divisions rather than connections. The protagonists battle with this diversity, which of course is exacerbated by their having to straddle different cultures within the Sudan but also in their migration journeys to England and France. This diversity does not always represent a richness of translation opportunities but rather the opposite in that different groups resort to politics of exclusion and eventually violence:

the general health of the country began to fail; education atrophied, medical services were themselves in need of crutches, the railway lines became as brittle as old bones, corruption spread like a cancer unchecked through the layers of society until there was no course of action open [...]. Of course fate delivered to us a regime capable of such cruelty and at the precise moment when they were required – unfortunately cruelty can be misdirected and so it was that *all the innocents were sacrificed instead while the guilty praised themselves on their timely arrival*. (Mahjoub, 1994: 140, emphasis added)

The kind of knowledge the protagonists attempt to share – in Sharif's case ideas of good governance and beneficial leadership, in Shibshib's case the love for literature – is not accepted in such a cruel environment where ignorance and insecurity reign. The Sudan becomes the epitome of ambivalence where the "enthusiasm and flag-waving ideals of freedom and signs of modernisation" coexist with the realistic threat of "destitution and civil war" and fundamentalist Islam and where all of this is "overwritten with Western perceptions of a primitive and childlike past" (Mohsen, 2000: 2). Sharif, defeated by reality, muses in face of these discourses:

We have spent our lives chasing one mirage after another it seems. When we were young we spoke eagerly of freedom and liberty. Today we are scattered like dust on the wind, silenced by our helplessness. A continent of children, the headlines scream, unable to stand on their own feet. We have become a parody of ourselves called upon to inhabit the spaces abandoned by modern industry. (Mahjoub 1994: 4-5)

The complexity of the political situation of the Sudan leaves the protagonists helpless and attempts at change become the “chasing of a mirage”. Where a politics of translation would help to bridge gaps, the text shows that there is little interest within the political ruling elite in engaging with different groups inside or outside the country, because of “limited understanding”, “vanity” and a growing religious fervour of the individuals involved (Mahjoub, 1994: 49). The narrative follows the historical processes of the Sudan outlined briefly in the introduction: It spans the change from the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium to the rise of nationalism and independence to the subsequent beginnings of civil war and the rise of Islamicist fundamentalism. The threat of fundamentalism lies in its power to curb the transmission of knowledge in order to silence rigorous debate and critical thinking. The narrator, Sharif, points this out explicitly:

We have entered a new age of doubt in which the dictates of men who fear discourse and debate dominate. An age in which school teachers are beaten and tortured for their ability to read, *for all knowledge in these dark times is dangerous*. In the eyes of these fanatics I would be condemned as a heretic and despatched without ceremony. Those who can remember are dangerous, for they might recall that there is an alternative to this madness. (Mahjoub, 1994: 5)

Wings of Dust presents the reader with a narrative where alternative ideals and scholarly knowledge – as espoused by Sharif and Shibshib – are slowly but surely eradicated.

Exile and madness: A portrait of two translators, Sharif and Shibshib

In *Wings of Dust* the characters, Sharif and Shibshib, do not re-invent home within the narrative as they end up in exile and in madness, but Sharif's telling nonetheless remains an act of resistance. The following analysis focuses on the development of these two characters in order to show how they try to translate their knowledge and how these attempts are curtailed by the authorities at hand. The text shows that the Sudan is ridden with discontinuities right at the outset of the story when Sharif narrates his two births: "once in among the slumped mud walls of that distant riverain village of my father. The second date would be that assigned to me many years later when I arrived to begin my education at a school in the capital" (Mahjoub, 1994: 4). Something that is ordinarily unambiguous and a firm fact, is cast into doubt by a colonial school system which does not regard time measured in moon cycles acceptable and thus insists on a Western calendar, catapulting Sharif "into the modern Gregorian world with the insensitivity of bureaucratic tradition" (Mahjoub, 1994: 4). Immediately the knowledge of the child, knowledge of the village, is disregarded as illiterate and has to be replaced by western schooling. This is continued when Sharif is sent to study at Oxford, for which he is "helplessly unprepared" and where he loses his self-esteem very quickly (Mahjoub, 1994: 9).

Sharif's initial attempts at fitting in fail. He realises that "the jokes that I knew did not translate very well" and so he finds himself in a group of colonial students under the guide of Tommy Trenter whose parents worked as missionaries in South India (Mahjoub, 1994: 9). Even though Sharif is grateful at the beginning for knowing Trenter, this changes quickly as he manages to acclimatise by "learning the way to dress, to eat, to drink, to light Players cigarettes as though I had been doing it all my life" (Mahjoub, 1994: 10). Sharif then realises that his association with Trenter's charity only serves to highlight his difference rather than erasing it, because Trenter "having spent his youth in India now found that a gap existed between the Englishness that he had learned and that which he

found evident at Oxford. In effect he was a stranger in his own land" (Mahjoub, 1994: 20). Sharif's assessment of Treter is in fact something which will characterise Sharif as well. On his return to the Sudan he becomes a stranger in his own land, because the kind of knowledges he learned to value in his time abroad in England, namely "honesty, compassion and rebellion", do not translate well into post-independence politics where everybody seems to be motivated by the prospect that "some of the fruit will fall their way" (Mahjoub, 1994: 150). The text thus shows that it is possible to both translate and gain knowledge in a private capacity, but as soon as this interferes with any kind of authority and political reality it is doomed to fail.

It is not primarily through academic work at Oxford that Sharif gains knowledge in England, though he is offered a bursary to continue with postgraduate studies, which he declines because "no one could accuse me of having been a diligent or outstanding case" (Mahjoub, 1994: 70). Interestingly, it is resistance to this totalitarian system of knowledge which teaches him about rebellion: "I was too restless and was unable to apply myself to the pursuit of knowledge along those defined routes which seemed to narrow the field of consciousness rather than broaden it" (Mahjoub, 1994: 56). Thus in England he first starts questioning structures of authority, of staging dissent. His friendship with Shibshib contributes to this:

If it hadn't been for Shibshib I can safely say that my life would have followed a different course. His disregard for convention rang the bell in my head that I had been waiting for. He had a year's seniority over me and this was a lifetime of wisdom in those dark days. (Mahjoub 1994: 14)

Rather than going to his courses or to the library, Sharif sets out to learn the cultural codes around him. This cultural form of knowledge allows him to 'fit in'. For example, he gets used to drinking ale and going along to rugby matches: "I contented myself with clapping when the others clapped and cheering when the others cheered, having decided that the subtleties of the game were firmly

beyond my grasp” (Mahjoub, 1994: 18). In this instance, Mahjoub’s text is very similar to Vassanji’s description of the East African student Ramji in the novel *Amriika*, who also uses all his energy to acclimatise and adopt the social behaviour of the academic milieu. Bourdieu has defined this knowledge of cultural codes appropriate for the behaviour which signals belonging to a particular group as “cultural capital” which is transmitted through education and family background (Bourdieu, 1984: 13). What is obvious here is that the migrants are sometimes at a loss; they lack the insider knowledge of the cultural codes which surround them. In both texts the foreign students try to acquire the cultural competence as quickly as possible, so that they can wrest a feeling of ‘having arrived’ from their often indifferent and sometimes hostile environment. Bourdieu points out that only when behaviour appears “natural”, can a person claim to belong to a particular cultural group:

it only recognizes as legitimate the relation to culture (or language) which least bears the visible marks of its genesis, which has nothing ‘academic’, ‘scholastic’, ‘bookish’, ‘affected’ or ‘studied’ about it, but manifests by its ease and naturalness [...]. (Bourdieu, 1984: 68)

While both Sharif and Ramji are fluent in English and have a general sense of appropriate behaviour, they nonetheless struggle to make up for the lack of, in Bourdieu’s words, “embodied capital of the previous generations” which would have provided them with an “advance” (Bourdieu, 1984: 70). Sharif recognises the crucial but subtle difference between arriving in a cultural group and “being received” by it:

I had arrived here at the end of that long ride over distances and generations, across wars, betrayals, pacts made and broken, the expansion and contraction of empires, from that dusty river bank where I was born and whose existence could not be dreamed by the clipped lawns and the paved quadrangles where their son now walks, his laces tied and his neck scrubbed, whose hands in their clumsy frustration do not toss the cutlery aside but strain to hold knife and fork straight with awkward delight; I had arrived, but I had not been received. (Mahjoub 1994: 18)

Table manners, clothes and the layout of greenery function as indicators of a particular class consciousness and cultural code, which the migrants do not share. The dissociation from the familiar landscape by the river, which according to the text is already set in motion when the British assign the narrator a second date of birth, is further exacerbated by his studying abroad, as this passage demonstrates. Mahjoub uses landscape here as a code for the immense translation and adjustment Sharif has undergone. The two contrasting images of the dusty river and the clipped English gardens serve to highlight the immense gulf which exists between these realities. Interestingly, after his return to the Sudan, the narrator tries to plant a garden, which is reminiscent of this English green. What Sharif recognises is that in order to build a society he needs to make his underlying principles visible. The new garden signifies order and benevolence and thus functions as

a model, a physical manifestation of the future on a small scale. There were flowers and trees, all shades and scents grew there, and a huge splendid lawn that was as thick as a pile carpet. There were bougainvillea and hibiscus and tamarind and roses as well as groves of lime and mango, papaya and guava trees [...]. I wanted my garden to be a centre where all could meet and feel free. (Mahjoub, 1994: 164)

Mahjoub uses the word “model” deliberately to link Sharif’s planting efforts to scholarly knowledge production. A model is usually a small-scale replica of a bigger project, suggesting that this garden is a trial area for Sharif to test his knowledge about good governance and a politics which benefit the people. To cultivate a garden, reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, where harmony and freedom reign without any threat as a model for the future is a compelling image of translation and transformation. The narrator goes on to describe how families started flocking there for their picnics and how it became indeed a central meeting place. This image of hope and idealism, which according to the narrator “lasted for no more than a decade”, comes crashing down when the Prime Minister reminds him that “as a whole the picture is less encouraging” and that

“we are a long way from a stable parliamentary system that all regions are satisfied with” (Mahjoub, 1994: 170). To avoid the jealousy of other players in the government, the narrator is urged to go away for a while, so that the volatile situation can improve. On his return, Sharif finds his garden swallowed by the desert dust, his house in tatters, the whole village deserted, pages of books fluttering across the veranda – “the time of learning had passed” (Mahjoub, 1994: 208). The knowledge Sharif tried to translate from an English environment into a Sudanese environment has been destroyed. This episode in the text suggests that while the narrator certainly has been ‘received’ back in the Sudan, he finds it difficult to ‘arrive’, as his ideas about governing are so vastly different from those around him. He becomes a stranger in his own land and is sent into exile again. The knowledge he gains abroad cannot be translated into a political landscape, where knowledge and thinking is feared, where factions of “fanatics” and “heretics” are pitted against each other (Mahjoub, 1994: 5). The novel repeatedly insists that there is little common ground on which to connect and communicate.

Oxford, and later Paris, where Sharif and other young Sudanese study and meet, become the most open spaces for the characters to test their ideas about politics and ethics and the reader is made aware that some will become the future revolutionaries, politicians and dictators of the independent Sudan: “I recognized the enormity of the task that lay ahead of us. We were part of an experiment” (Mahjoub, 1994: 49). Again, Mahjoub uses a word which is significant in the arenas of knowledge production. “Experiments” are practical ways to test certain scientific theses, to verify theories or to discard them. The fact that Sharif identifies himself as an experiment indicates that while he himself might feel that he can make a valuable contribution to the politics of the Sudan, his government could discard him just as one would a failed experiment. Eventually this happens, when he is exiled from the Sudan.

In the large part of the narrative set in the intellectual climate of post-war Europe, a space of voluntary exile, Sharif’s group of fellow students still “views itself as

the only possible solution after the end of colonialism” (Mohsen, 2000: 5).

However, their different viewpoints as to how the country could be run in the face of no cohesive sense of unity point to tragedies the nation state will endure in the course of the text. Sharif ties this particularly to their acquired ‘Englishness’:

‘I’m saying that we are being groomed for the slaughter. We will inherit the land, but we will also be unable to cross the boundary left by the British, our education will see to that. We will become our own imperialists.’ Cries of ‘Nonsense!’ ‘Rubbish!’ assailed me. Was it premonition or something more? Would things have been different if they had heeded my warning or could the facts of time not be evaded no matter how well prepared we were? They were captured by their own ambition. (Mahjoub, 1994: 60)

Again, the text invokes cultural translation in speaking of the necessary but difficult crossing of the boundary left by the English. The crucial insight the narrator has here is that the Sudan is mainly populated by peasants, who have been subjected to colonial invasion which brought with it language and religion, namely Arabic, Islam, English and Christianity. To communicate with the people, to translate between languages and religious groups, would require somebody else than “a group of over-inflated intellectuals” (Mahjoub, 1994: 71). When Sharif asks these ambitious ‘revolutionaries’ whether the country of herders and farmers would “after more than three hundred years of foreign rule” trust them, all they can say is that “it won’t be easy” (Mahjoub, 1994: 71). Mohsen rightly points out that the whole novel rests “on the proposal and refutation of a variety of solutions to an ever-deepening crisis, which remains unresolved” (Mohsen, 2000: 5). She also argues convincingly that the most unsettling feature portrayed is “the failure of earnest discourses of ‘cultural rebellion’ [as attempted by Shibshib] to survive and be translated into action” (Mohsen, 2000: 5). Cultural rebellion as an act of transmitting knowledge, which crosses boundaries, is the best alternative to the political crisis, even though it is not granted with success.

When Sharif meets Shibshib in Oxford, the text introduces him as a dedicated scholar of literature, whose love for his books, his notes and his poetry is directed

“inwards to some vision of beauty” and later becomes directed outwards to inspire a generation of Sudanese students (Mahjoub, 1994: 15). His poetry and academic work is noteworthy and possibly a real contribution to what *Wings of Dust* calls “cultural rebellion” (Mahjoub, 1994: 154). When Shibshib returns to the Sudan, after having completed his studies at Oxford, he is given a post at the University in Khartoum, and aims to document the changes in the country through poetry: “If we are ever to rebuild this country in our own mould we must have a broad cultural foundation” (Mahjoub, 1994: 74). That his own perception of what such a cultural foundation should entail differs radically from that of his senior colleagues only encourages him. Apart from his poetry he works on a literal translation of Joyce’s *Ulysses* into Arabic in order to “attack the very heart of their cultural fortress by applying myself to something which is seen as unfathomable and tasteless” (Mahjoub, 1994: 74). Like Aboulela, Mahjoub portrays a translator, who by trade occupies already the interstices between languages and cultures.

Shibshib’s translation is significant in many ways and is directed both at academia in the Sudan and at defying the perceived superiority of Western literature. The text asserts the attempt of using cross-cultural translation as a way of shaping African cultural politics after independence. It challenges both a narrowly defined perception of Arabic as the tool of the translation and the untouchability of the text to be translated. As the narrator points out “all the senior staff had either read *Ulysses* and regarded the book untranslatable, especially to Arabic, or otherwise had not and dismissed the whole thing as obscene and in bad taste” (Mahjoub, 1994: 74). Shibshib’s project is a post-colonial gesture of writing back to the empire by rewriting a European masterpiece into an Arabic book:

This was the form of his defiance; cultural rebellion – let us take their language and turn its inflections into ours, let us assassinate their sacred poets, beloved laureates and speak their words through our tongues, invert the frozen image with which they fix us to

their dissection boards, their maps of the world and turn to hold the mirror up towards them so that they might see. (Mahjoub 1994: 154)

Translation is seen here as a process of subversion of existing imbalances of power. This subversion is underlined by translation theory which maintains that “translation is not the production of one text equivalent to another text, but rather a complex process of rewriting that runs parallel both to the overall view of language and of the ‘Other’ people have throughout history; and to the influences and the balance of power that exist between one culture and another” (Álvarez, 1996: 4). Shibshib’s translation of the Joyce novel is an act of ‘assassination’ and of ensuring its survival in a different cultural realm. It is thus defying cultural images of Western superiority but also a fruitful bringing together of source and target culture.

This view provides another possible reading of this translation. It can be read as a tentative precursor of a prominent idea in the later novel *The Carrier*, namely that cross-pollination of Western and African/Islamic knowledges can be beneficial. Shibshib’s assertion that the resistance from his senior colleagues to his project has to do with their narrowness must be read in conjunction with the rise of fundamentalist Islam in Sudanese politics, where many things change at the implementation of the Shari’a, which stifles knowledge production: “what had been liberal was now conservative, what had been modern was now traditional, what had been free speech was now silence” (Mahjoub, 1994: 107). This shift sets in motion the persecution of the carriers and translators of such other knowledge and leads directly to Shibshib’s demise and psychological illness.

Moreover, Shibshib’s project is also an expression of the interconnectedness of cultures during imperialism, thus offering a realistic view of the way different cultures had been in contact for centuries already, of existing connections. At one point in the narrative, thinking of the many languages, knowledges and religions that have influenced the history of the Sudan, Sharif asks himself:

But who were we really? What united us as a single coherent people? In the ancient graves you can find the seeds of confusion and doubt. People were buried according to custom with the signs of Isis and Osiris and Apadamac the local lion-headed serpent-bodied lotus, but under their heads was a discreetly placed cross- just in case. Each incursion overlays the previous one until finally nobody really knows who they are and where they came from. Perhaps that is why the fighting is still going on today. (Mahjoub 1994: 71-72)

These layers of encounters over time and the mixing of religious rituals negate arguments of cultural and religious purity. Shibshib's translation of *Ulysses*, which itself is a text often regarded as consisting of layers and layers of "greek mythology and philosophy, many literatures, theology, Irish history and historical linguistics and many other influences", is set against cultural purism and an exclusive religious nationalism (Lobsien, 1993: 1). In a lecture, Mahjoub explains that "in many ways people of the Third World, the Middle East, Africa etc must have a sense of global awareness that goes back to the colonial period and beyond" and all his novels refer to these layers of incursions and translations (Mahjoub, 1997: 1). To reiterate, Mahjoub's most endearing and bravest characters, even though they are doomed to failure, are aware of the layers and connections across cultural boundaries. Shibshib is no exception. At the dawn of independence he sends a letter to Sharif in Paris, which expresses his idealism: "The world is changing my friend and I see a new alliance on the horizon between the nations of the world. On the other hand there has never been so much back-stabbing" (Mahjoub, 1994: 87). The back-stabbing and corruption prove to be pervasive and Shibshib's descent into madness at the end of the novel "mirrors the estrangement of intellectual projects from the bare reality of things" and demonstrates that social change is difficult to achieve by the idealism of a few (Mohsen, 2000: 5).

When Sharif finally returns to the Sudan, he visits Shibshib's office at the university and the text offers an interesting description, hinting at the futility of

Shibshib's translation project, which has become much broader than his previous work on Joyce:

Here he sat burning the hours of his life away like an alchemist in a dark crypt, with the dedication of a cross-eyed lunatic trying to thread a needle, he searched to discover his vision of hope, to eventually weave together the strange displaced strands of our collective past into one big fuse which would explode into a mighty firecracker of light guiding us into the future. (Mahjoub 1994: 152)

Alchemy, the 'science' of turning matter into gold, of creating something precious out of ordinary material, perhaps captures best both the futility but also the immense allure of Shibshib's endeavours. Shibshib's hope for the political future of the Sudan rests on his belief that a collective past can be constructed through poetry and that the "expansion of the consciousness" of his peers is possible by exposing them to cultural material in his translations that is foreign (Mahjoub, 1994: 154). The metaphor of forcing different threads through a needle in the dark attests to the enormity of this task. But Mahjoub again draws attention to the value of this attempt, by linking this activity to the further metaphor of the exploding firecrackers, which of course echoes his idea of a spectrum of colours. The text insists that this work has to be done in order to ensure a more humane future. However, in a cultural climate of corruption and persecution, this is prevented and Shibshib is tried for "treason and apostasy" and is only acquitted because of his "insanity" (Mahjoub, 1994: 154). Sharif suffers a similar fate when made governor of his region. He sets out trying to forge connections across different regions to create a sense of national unity and when he surprisingly succeeds, he is told that "there is a very delicate balance between the admiration of your colleagues and their envy" (Mahjoub, 1994: 169). He is imprisoned and eventually escapes into exile to recount his story. In *Wings of Dust* cultural translation as the weaving together of different strands of knowledges is severely curtailed by the intervention of state/religious authority, but there is always the reader, who is invited to keep on translating. Jamal Mahjoub's later novel *The Carrier* continues this theme of intervention by political and religious power to

prevent translations of scholarly knowledge. In this later novel, the knowledge to be carried across cultures is scientific as the text provides a fictional reason for the fact that the Copernican revolution reached the Islamic world quite late (Sévry, 2001: 89).

Copernicus, carriers and the translation of scientific knowledge

In *The Carrier* translation is both a tool of gaining and disseminating knowledge as well as a strategy of survival for the main characters, Rashid al-Kenzy and Hassan. As in all the other novels of migration examined in this thesis, Mahjoub's novel suggests that translation is the one strategy to enable the characters to cease being alien, even if only temporarily and incompletely. *The Carrier* describes the intertwining journeys of travelling scientists, who have to use translation to gain access to the heterogeneous knowledge of astronomy and science across barriers of languages, cultures, religions, and countries. Such barriers, the text argues, are often policed and upheld by ignorance and superstition and need to be surmounted in order to forge a human connection that is based on understanding and mutual respect. The daring of such a translation project lies in the transgression perceived by religious and civic authorities as well as individuals, whose fear of the unknown makes them suspicious of both protagonists. Mahjoub explains in an interview that "prejudice spares no one, no matter how learned we are, because it is a primitive instinct which we have to overcome" (Tervonen, 2001: 2). To reiterate, this novel, like *Wings of Dust*, poses the question of what happens to carriers of knowledge, to translators in the context of prejudice and power.

Mahjoub's novel bifurcates into two plotlines. Most of the chapters are set in the early 17th century and a few at the end of the 20th century, not to create "a kind of nostalgia for the past" but to prevent a positivistic "discarding of the past as no longer relevant" (Tervonen, 2001: 2). Thus *The Carrier* translates between past and present. This resonates with Mahjoub's training as a geologist – someone

who tries to access information about the past through present formations. This search is transposed from rock into the textual fabric of the novel. Like a geologist, who slices through layers of stone, Mahjoub gives the reader layers of narration which allow an understanding of the present through the lens of the past.

The 17th century plot begins with Rashid al-Kenzy's imprisonment in Algiers and the subsequent task set him by the Dey of Algiers to journey North to search for a mysterious Dutch optical device, the telescope, news of which had travelled to Algiers by sea. The telescope, an instrument intended for seeing things out of reach, becomes synonymous in the text with Rashid's curiosity to gain knowledge of things beyond the boundaries of what is already known. This is where Rashid's quest begins, which will eventually lead to his being shipwrecked off the coast of Jutland, Denmark. There he is rescued and employed by Heinesen, a scientist/astronomer and his highly educated sister, Sigrid. In addition to finding the telescope, he learns "that the sun was the source of the world's light and that the earth was a simple singing orb" around the sun (Mahjoub, 1998: 274). This knowledge of heliocentricity is radical, because it causes a conflict with the powers that be – religious and civic authority.

Rashid's knowledge of many languages makes him the perfect 'carrier' for the charge of finding the telescope, as different languages function as gate-keepers to different systems of knowledge. The text thus stresses the role of translation in "the interdependence of cultures and learning" (Tervonen, 2001: 1). Rashid states that:

I can read and write, with varying degrees of proficiency, Arabic, Greek, Latin, Persian, Soghdian. I also have a little knowledge of Sanskrit. I can converse in the language of the Franks and, of course, the *lingua franca* of the sea. (Rashid al-Kenzy in Mahjoub, 1998: 221)

Rashid's ability to translate languages as a way of gaining knowledge is amply demonstrated in the text, where he gains understanding of the ideas of many influential thinkers, of knowledge handed down through time:

The mysteries of the heavens could not be unravelled by one simple man. But the torch was passed on, from the Babylonians and the Pharaohs to the Greeks and Persians, then to the Indians and Chinese. The walls of the academy rang with their names, so that it would take a lifetime simply to learn who they were and what they had done. (Mahjoub, 1998: 71)

The image of the torch in this quotation echoes Mahjoub's other metaphors for sharing scholarly knowledge across cultures: the image of exploding firecrackers in *Wings of Dust* as well as the metaphor of the crack of colourful light between the readers and the text. All of these metaphors are a result of translation activity. Therefore, translating becomes integral to deciphering meaning and Mahjoub is at pains to emphasise that "the great leap of learning in the 16th-17th century in Europe could not have happened without the East, in this case the Arab world" and that "progress comes not from isolation, but from the breaking of boundaries" (Tervonen, 2001: 1). This breaking of boundaries of course is only possible through translating between languages, cultures and knowledges. The omniscient narrator says about Rashid that the mission of his lifetime is "to reveal" and this is linked to processes of translation throughout the text (Mahjoub, 1998: 244). However, he is not the only character who endeavours to decipher and translate. Hassan's narrative adds another layer to the processes of translation within the novel.

The 20th century plot focuses on Hassan, a geologist who lives nearly four hundred years later than Rashid. He is called to an archaeological site in Jutland from Copenhagen where he works at the Near Eastern Institute. On this site, the archaeologists have dug up a body buried with a mysterious brass box, containing an instrument which allows Muslim travellers to find the direction of the Ka'ba at Mecca for their prayers. The box is engraved with Rashid al-Kenzy's

name and Hassan is meant to translate the Arabic inscription. Okking, the residing archaeologist, describes him as “the man they sent to read the gobbledygook” (Mahjoub, 1998: 42). Okking’s description of Arabic in such a manner reveals his ignorance and highlights Mahjoub’s assertion about prejudice that is manifested in the text. Hassan’s profession as a geologist/archaeologist builds on translations, entailing decoding layers of remnants from the past. Findings, like the mysterious brass box alongside Heinesen’s skeleton, appear obscure at first, because of their distance in time, language and juxtaposition, but Hassan slowly uncovers some of the secrets, by carrying across bits of evidence from the past into the present. The difficulty of such a task is expressed by Okking, who says to Hassan that “the fabric of history is actually made up of holes, all the unwritten accounts, and voices which remain silent” (Mahjoub, 1998: 253).

The thread that connects the two plotlines is Hassan’s curiosity about the past and the possible reason for the traveller from the Middle East, Rashid, ending up in this remote corner of the Danish peninsula. Hassan eventually discovers that this piece of land belonged to Verner Heinesen in the 17th century and it is precisely the intercultural connection between Rashid and Heinesen which fascinates Hassan. But this connection remains inaccessible to him, because of “the dark spaces between the evidence” (Mahjoub, 1998: 114). The reader, fortunately, is in a better position, because the omniscient narrator fills in some of the holes so that this unusual and unlikely relationship between an Arab and European scientist in the early 17th century becomes a credible story.

Rashid, a young slave boy born to a slave woman and her master, a rich merchant, realises very quickly that it is only through knowledge he can gain some control of his life that is otherwise determined by his masters. He is only sent to the madrasa, a prestigious Islamic school, because he needs to help his half-brother Ismail, who “despite the size of his head, had difficulty in catching hold of anything” (Mahjoub, 1998: 32). It is through this stroke of luck that Rashid

receives the best education available at the time. However, this never completely releases him from his 'lowly' social standing. He remains a 'translated person', and the people who meet him are puzzled by his mixed identity, which seems to be comprised of mutually exclusive formations:

The dark hue of his skin suggests a man of lowly origins, a slave even. However, the refined manner in which he speaks the language of the Prophet tells us that he is, or once was, a man of some standing or, [...] at least of some ambition. (Mahjoub, 1998: 14)

At the school, Rashid is particularly fascinated by the teachings of the Sufis, "wondering what mysteries their devotions contained" (Mahjoub, 1998: 33). In an interview, Mahjoub points out that the Sufi movement in the Sudan, in conflict with the orthodox version of Islam, concerns itself more with the disconnection between faith and reason and it is this path that Rashid follows in the novel (Sévry, 2001: 87). This is obviously important as it might allow for a reconciliation of the theory of heliocentricity with faith. At the school Rashid learns new languages and thereby frightens his mother, Butheyra, who perhaps recognises that this knowledge distances her son from her and gives him access to other worlds:

She was afraid of that stream of gibberish which came from his tongue, placed there by those turbanned greybeards from the madrasa. She would mutter under her breath, begging the Almighty to take the devil's earth from her boy's mouth. Rashid in turn explained patiently that everything they were taught was knowledge which came with the blessing of the Prophet attached to it. 'That may be all very well in the big house, but your place is here in the kitchen, and don't you forget it'. (Mahjoub, 1998: 34)

Butheyra accurately perceives that this knowledge might make her son resentful of his social position as a slave, which proves to be true, as throughout the narrative Rashid tries to transcend the narrowly defined social role assigned to him. Moreover, her focus on language as gibberish is a precursor of Okking's judgement of Arabic as gobbledygook later in the novel. Both perceive, but also

feel threatened by, the power of language to which they do not have access. And it is this specialised knowledge of language which positions both Rashid and Hassan as the translators or carriers of the text.

The above quotation raises the conflict between knowledge and religion. Religion allows knowledge production within its own frame of reference, but in the novel religious authority incessantly hounds down what it perceives as 'heretic' knowledge production. At this point in the narrative, Rashid asserts that knowledge is sanctioned by Allah and this is important to him. He wants to keep his faith intact, "the one thing which has sustained him through all the years of his life" (Mahjoub, 1998: 242). When Rashid's half-brother dies of a fever, Rashid has to escape from the rage of the merchant's wife. With the help of his teachers he enters "the outcast colony of scholars which was known as the Valley of Dreamers" (Mahjoub, 1998: 34). In the Valley of Dreamers, the secret academy and observatory of the stars, where he spends his teenage years, scientific knowledge is explored within the parameters of the Koran:

There was no sign of randomness, this was not the reckless hand of coincidence; each and every distance between the fixed stars was measured. Their brightness was arranged on a scale. Their message was written there by the Creator for man to study, to awaken his senses and make him learn. (Mahjoub, 1998: 70)

In the religious institutions of learning, the madrasa and the Valley of Dreamers, Rashid is encouraged in the active pursuit of knowledge, but the Koran also says that "the sun runs his course determined by the Exalted in Might, the All-Knowing" (Ali, 1997: 392), placing religious revelation over reason. This conflict between knowledge coming from Allah as opposed to 'heretic' knowledge, which contradicts the teaching of the Koran, is explored at length in this novel.

With knowledge comes the desire for freedom and Rashid's world expands beyond what "he had ever known in that great house where he was born to serve" (Mahjoub, 1998: 70). Much later, when Rashid is given the task to journey

and find the telescope, this connection between knowledge and freedom is made explicit again. He is granted his freedom from imprisonment and his life is spared precisely because he possibly possesses enough knowledge to succeed in his given task:

He was a slave, and not only that, a slave who had run away. He had no standing, not even the honour of being in service, but he now had a vision. If he could achieve this thing, if he could bring back the telescope for the Dey, then perhaps he would find that peace of mind that always persisted in eluding him. His life was a catalogue of departures, all of them leading him here, it would seem. Was this the mission he had been waiting for all his life? (Mahjoub 1998: 59-60)

Peace of mind is not something that Rashid finds on his journey and when confronted with Heinesen's and Sigrid's knowledge of heliocentricity, his faith is severely tested. As a co-worker with Heinesen in his project of building a huge observatory, "a beast to do battle with the heavens", Rashid struggles to reconcile his faith and the newly gained knowledge of astronomy. He worries that his "soul will be eaten by the stars" (Mahjoub, 1998: 215).

Heinesen too, is producing knowledge that the church regards as evil and his plans to build the observatory are perceived with suspicion. He explains his 'forbidden' scientific project to Andersson, a local engineer: "I want to prove what the ancients knew, what the Hermetica texts show, that Copernicus was right, that the sun is the centre of all things" (Mahjoub, 1998: 154). Andersson's reaction is sobering: he warns Heinesen that this means taking up "arms against the church" (Mahjoub, 1998: 154). When the church in the local town burns down in 1611, Heinesen, Sigrid and Rashid are accused of evil by the priest:

'If ever there was a sign from above, then this is it. And what does that sign tell us? That there is evil among us, being perpetuated by members of our very own community. They [Heinesen and Sigrid] bring the devil himself among us, in the form of this wretched, tarry beast. What purpose does he serve? I shall tell you. They have tampered with the

firmament of the heavens, with their instruments and their spells. With their foul tongues and their curses'. (Mahjoub 1998: 262)

Here the protagonists inhabit a completely different universe from that of the priest and the other townspeople, who he mobilises against them. The curiosity of knowledge seemingly beyond reach is what characterises all the protagonists and it is interesting that only those characters with this curiosity can transcend the different cultural boundaries. When Heinesen is asked why he employs the devil [Rashid], he claims it is out of curiosity (Mahjoub, 1998: 201). Only much later in the narrative does he learn of Rashid's linguistic abilities and his usefulness as a translator of Heinesen's many collected manuscripts. Heinesen and Rashid share the belief that if they could combine all the knowledge about the universe from western sources and get translations of Egyptian and Islamic texts, they would "crack the secrets of the universe" (Mahjoub, 1998: 210). This fertile coming together of scientific knowledge from East and West is further explored in discussions about Copernicus with Sigrid.

Rashid looks at the diagrams she shows him and realises that "Copernicus must surely have known the ideas of Nasr al din al-Tusi" (Mahjoub, 1998: 239). The kind of knowledge the characters search for is radical, portending persecution from religious and civic authority; a knowledge unearthing and/or forging connections across the interstices of cultures. The fact that Rashid brings al-Tusi and Copernicus together, as well as his own collaboration with Heinesen and Sigrid, bears testimony to knowledge functioning in this relational way. At the archaeological site, the material traces of their relationships, namely the brass box and Heinesen's skeleton, are what intrigue Hassan: How is it possible that Rashid and Heinesen met each other? In this line of questioning Hassan is departing from any kind of logical procedure of his profession:

The brass case would be logged and identified in terms of place and date of origin etc. But what really intrigued him was what could not be proved in any scientific manner. Who was this man al Kenzy and what had brought him here? At the back of his mind Hassan

knew that he was spending too much time on this matter. It had become something akin to an obsession, he realized. (Mahjoub 1998: 114)

The reason this case becomes an obsession, rather than detached scholarship, lies in the fact that it is extremely compelling for Hassan to imagine a relationship between two scientists at the beginning of the 17th century that transgressed racial boundaries so clearly. He struggles to deal with the condescension of his white colleagues, who constantly make him feel out of place in Jutland, where he is eyed with suspicion by the locals and feels “his presence magnified” sticking out “like the proverbial sore thumb” (Mahjoub, 1998: 108). He wonders beyond the scope of his evidence, how Rashid would have fared in the same environment so long ago. This is the translation from the past that Hassan would like to accomplish in the present. The text speaks of the immense difficulty of this translation:

Whatever might have been recorded about the man known as Rashid-al Kenzy has been scattered down the passage of centuries like a fine trail; difficult if not impossible to follow. A thin and fragile course indeed, leaving only disparate fragments in the way of clues to be pieced together; *a task only to be undertaken by the mentally unsound or by the most stubbornly persistent of scholars* (Mahjoub 1998: 2, emphasis added)

It is this attribute of stubbornness shared by the protagonists in both novels, which makes them translators between traditions of knowledge across cultures. In *Wings of Dust* Shibshib’s stubborn translation project is threatened by years of “foul-mouthed back biting politics” under which pressures Shibshib literally turns mad (Mahjoub, 1994: 154). In her discussion of *The Carrier* Cooper points out that:

The novel echoes with the stubbornness of scholars through the ages and across cultures; we encounter them in Africa, in Jutland, in Copenhagen, and always they work within the spaces that the forces with power and resources make available; they work within accepted traditions of knowledge, sometimes shared across cultures and sometimes behind great walls of ignorance and prejudice. (Cooper 2006: 2)

Ignorance and prejudice are factors that, combined with institutions of power, defeat the protagonists and it is at this point that stubbornness can turn to madness. In *The Carrier* Hassan, whose journey of discovery is poised on this boundary between scholarly persistence and madness, wonders about his obsession in the quest for knowledge. Mahjoub, himself a scientist of mixed cultural heritage and a migrant writer, positions his characters in the precarious gap between scholarly persistence and the maddening confrontation with power and prejudice. There are echoes of Hassan's struggle in the 17th century plot as well, where Heinesen is accused of madness for allowing Rashid to work for him. Moreover, Heinesen and Sigrid are accused of madness, because of their scholarly work, by the authorities of the town who insist that Heinesen's teacher, the astronomer Tycho Brahe, had a disturbed mind and thus warn Heinesen of a similar fate (Mahjoub, 1998: 200). The King's Prefect, Holst, is the most vehement in his reaction to Heinesen as he seems to sense the existential implication of the theory of heliocentricity and its direct impact on religion as an institution of power:

I am not an ignorant man, Heinesen. I am aware of the secularism rife among certain learned circles regarding the movements of heavenly spheres. Idle minds entertaining themselves with foolish speculation. Your ideas mean nothing to the ordinary people of this world. They know nothing but the kingdom of God. To them your indulgent imaginings are not only incomprehensible, *they are also a threat.* (Mahjoub, 1998: 200-201)

The text shows that Holst, and the other figures of authority, interpret scholarly persistence as mental instability and as a threat. This threat to their authority adds pressure to the protagonists' quest for knowledge. Their attempts at discovering the unknown, with such zeal and high personal risk, does affect the protagonists in profound ways. They take mental strain. Heinesen's physical decline after being accused of evil by the priest is directly linked to the incursion of power that shakes him to the core: "Heinesen was never to recover [...]. He

lost all interest in anything and refused to address any matter whatsoever. There was no mention of his ambitious plans” (Mahjoub, 1998: 265).

The texts’ close proximity of rigorous scholarship in translation and the ambiguity of perceived and/or possibly real mental instability points to the fragility of such breaking of boundaries. Mahjoub’s texts thus assert the possibility of intercultural relationships while at the same time pointing to their unlikely and threatened occurrence. The reading experience itself, which positions the reader as translator of the text, rather than the stories within the narrative, becomes the most successful ‘intercultural’ relationship. Certainly Mahjoub sees this as his contribution as a migrant postcolonial writer.

By revealing the story of Heinesen’s body, the box and Rashid’s journey, the narrative itself becomes a body of knowledge “to be unravelled layer by layer by the hands of an experienced lover” – which of course is the reader (Mahjoub, 1998: 1). Interestingly, the readers are translating between the two plotlines and between the increasing evidence, as revealed slowly in the reading process. This brings to mind Spivak’s assertion that “translation is the most intimate act of reading” (Spivak, 1993: 180). What I am arguing here is the reverse: intimate reading is an act of translation. Moreover, the narrator positions the reader in close proximity to Rashid and Hassan. Thus the humiliation and violence of ignorance and racism become a translation as well. Like a lover discovering imperfections, the reader too has to deal with the ugly elements of the narrative. The text suggests that increasing knowledge can be set against these acts of prejudice and ignorance. It is knowledge, or rather the curiosity for knowledge, that enables characters to form otherwise highly unlikely intercultural relationships. Hassan, like Rashid, also meets one person in Jutland that does not regard him with suspicion, but with curiosity and they become friends of sorts.

When the text introduces Martin, a young lanky boy who works in the local shop, there is no indication that he shares the curiosity of the other protagonists. His

eyes move “restlessly, avoiding any contact” and when asked about the age of the church building he looks “blank” (Mahjoub, 1998: 43). After two weeks of Hassan’s regular visits to the shop, it is revealed that Martin “was curious about all kinds of things, about the world beyond the confines of this village” (Mahjoub, 1998: 106). It is this spirit of wanting to find out, of wanting to depart, that Hassan relates to .

Martin’s and Hassan’s relationship is not equal in terms of age, education and social background and the text positions Hassan in the role of the mentor, even though Martin challenges Hassan as well. Martin needs Hassan as a catalyst to access his dreams and curiosity, which seem to have been dulled by the monotony of rural life. Once awakened he also becomes a seeker and quite possibly a traveller as well:

‘Someday I’d like to travel, you know? I mean I would like to go around the world. I don’t have anywhere specific in mind. I want to find my own special place. It might be in India. Have you ever been in India? That is one place I am definitely going to go’. (Mahjoub 1998: 188)

What is interesting is that once he joins the ranks of travellers, he gives an explanation at the archaeological site about the shape of the trenches that is slightly ridiculous but also perceptive. He says: “‘What about UFO’s?’ Hassan says to Okking: ‘Well, Martin may not be too far off in a manner of speaking. I think it does have something to do with the stars’” (Mahjoub, 1998: 189).

The text positions Martin between Hassan and the village, as cultural broker/translator of local custom and behaviour. Martin asserts, possibly sensing Hassan’s prejudice, “You see? We do know a thing or two out here” (Mahjoub, 1998: 158). However, Martin is not always right in his assessments of the villagers’ reactions to Hassan. When some village youths rev up the engine of their car next to Hassan’s, Martin says:

'They are only fooling about, you know. They don't mean anything by it. There's not a lot for them to do around here. There's not much choice. You talk as though they wanted to harm you or something. Like they want you to stop doing your work here. They know nothing about who you are or what you are doing here'. (Mahjoub, 1998: 222)

The text makes the point that a lack of curiosity of the cultural Other, the perpetuating ignorance, is what breeds intercultural aggression. This is what makes Hassan weary and nervous, because he finds it difficult to feel at ease in such a small place:

The countryside was all very well, thought Hassan, but the fact was that rural areas made him nervous. He was an urban creature. It didn't matter which city in the world it was, but he would always feel more at home in the preoccupied tangle of race, tongues and creeds, than in places like this. It was too quiet; [...] The truth, he acknowledged silently, was that he was as prejudiced as the next man. To him villages signified inbreeding, mental and social isolation, backwardness. (Mahjoub 1998: 108)

It becomes apparent that some of this prejudice is rather accurate when Hassan finds his house vandalised and a stuffed monkey stuck to his kitchen door (Mahjoub, 1998: 257). After an excruciating dinner at the Okkings, where Hassan senses that they are worried about their daughter living in Copenhagen, which to them represents a world "inhabited by people like him", he decides to end his research in Jutland (Mahjoub, 1998: 256). After the dinner, on his return, he finds the toy monkey stuck to the door of his house. This confirms his suspicion of hostility and even though he still has not figured out the connection between Heinesen and Rashid, he gives up. Hassan has, however, accomplished what is asked of him by the archaeologists and he decides it is "time to leave the past alone and come back to the real world" (Mahjoub, 1998: 257).

The decision to abandon the historical carrying across represents in Hassan's case a healthy turning away from an obsession. Martin manages to remind Hassan of that real world: "you have a life, a job, a family" (Mahjoub, 1998: 222). This reminder is important, as Hassan tends to focus on the negative aspects of

his environment and Martin challenges him to see the gifts beyond daily irritation. For Martin, their relationship has opened up the world and for Hassan, it showed that even a small village can provide friendship and not just backwardness. In this way, the modern section is a mirror to the past. Hassan experiences the same racial and cultural prejudice as Rashid, but he also finds friendship and respect in intercultural interactions.

Back in the 17th century, Verner Heinesen is unorthodox in his scientific quest as well as in his social relation to Rashid. When he rescues Rashid from the superstition and cruelty of the townspeople, he does not yet know of Rashid's extensive linguistic and scientific knowledge. Rashid is treated like all the other workers constructing the observatory: "He [Rashid] has begun to live among them. Their fear is breaking down with each handful of earth he claws away, each stone he lifts. This change comes grudgingly and is not complete" (Mahjoub, 1998: 179). Nevertheless he remains alone, isolated in his "darkness" and "alien nature" (Mahjoub, 1998: 179). He recognises that although he is tolerated among the workers, he will "never be one of them" (Mahjoub, 1998: 181). The workers never cease to be suspicious of him and the text establishes a tragic causal link between the death of a boy in the trenches and that instinctive prejudice:

The boy had apparently lost his footing and slipped down into the trench. Then the wind caught hold of the stone. Rashid reached out instinctively and touched another man's hand. The man gave a cry and pulled his hand away. It was a singular moment, an instinct, a stupid thing. It happened slowly. The stone beginning to tip, veering slowly earthwards, twisting out of his hands, his fingers, downwards [...]. (Mahjoub 1998: 185)

Darkness, heavy rain and shifting stones all contribute to this tragedy but it is the worker who recoils from Rashid's touch that ultimately causes the stone to slip, burying the boy underneath. In response to this tragedy, men of religious and civic authority come to warn Heinesen not to pursue "unholy manifestations" on

his property (Mahjoub, 1998: 200). It is during their visit that they see Rashid working at Heinesen's and they react with ignorance and fear:

Heinesen was about to reply when Rusk let out a cry. He turned to face them, his face as white as a sheet. 'In the name of heaven, the rumours are true.' 'Out there. It walks... on two legs.' 'Heavenly father, preserve us!' 'Have you taken leave of your senses, Heinesen?' (Mahjoub 1998: 201)

In Rashid's defence, Heinesen tries to stress common humanity but falls into the trap of describing Rashid in terms of his animal strength: "This man is a simple fellow. He works hard and as diligently as a well-trained horse" (Mahjoub, 1998: 202). Heinesen tries to demonstrate to the men that Rashid is a simpleton and asks him to write something. Only when the men have left, does Heinesen admit to having recognised Rashid's scribbles as the constellation of Pleiades. At this moment their master-servant relationship changes, as Heinesen acknowledges Rashid's knowledge. They look each other in the face for the first time: "I intend to put your abilities to good use, sir. You will assist me with your skills as a translator" (Mahjoub, 1998: 212). In this instance of Rashid's changing fate, translation yet again plays the key role in transforming his relationship with Heinesen. One notices that the shift in address is not complete. Even though the 'sir' suggests respect and equality, the nature of their relation as employee and employer remains obvious in the clear task set for Rashid. However, Heinesen deems it necessary to give Rashid an overview of the whole project of the observatory. This not only gives the translation work direction but also opens an avenue for Heinesen to unburden a bit of the loneliness and insecurities he experiences in regards to the project. Thus they become colleagues and eventually friends of a kind, and it is in Rashid's role as translator that the novel most successfully creates an intercultural relationship, even if only temporarily.

This crucial turning point of the novel hinges on Rashid's ability to translate. In other words, his cultural difference and background in Islamic science contributes importantly to Heinesen's scientific endeavour. The text thus stresses again how

scholarly knowledge relies on translation for dissemination. While translating the Toledan charts in a version by Ibn al-Ha'im from Arabic into Spanish for Heinesen, Rashid gets the chance to satisfy his own curiosity about the material in the vast library:

He began with the material in Arabic, of which there was little, mostly in poor condition and generally very aged, and progressed very quickly to the Spanish and then Greek texts. [...] The books which filled the shelves of that great library at once suffocated and stimulated his imagination. He wanted to swallow them all whole. He wanted to dig his way through page by page, line by line until all the knowledge hidden there in signs and ciphers was his. (Mahjoub, 1998: 220)

The project and the library keep Rashid from acting on his thoughts about escape, "there [is] another bond keeping him here, curiosity" (Mahjoub, 1998: 215):

He was fascinated by the wealth of literature that he had stumbled upon. Such a library that any king would have been proud to possess. The Dey of Algiers would have wept with envy. Rashid felt a twinge of pride in his achievement, in having reached this place, [...] If there was any constancy in his life then surely it was this: to learn, wherever and whenever the opportunity presented itself, and then to move when the time came. So he struggles day after day to try to fathom the knowledge of this new world. (Mahjoub 1998: 215)

At first, the books – objects of knowledge – absorb Rashid's attention but the text does not stop there. He soon finds that he feels attracted to Sigrid, Heinesen's sister. Like so frequently in this novel, the text moves from objects of curiosity, that is books, the brass box, the telescope and the stars, to people. The text frequently highlights that curiosity about things that are deemed out of reach encourages an openness to difference, and a daring to cross racial and cultural boundaries. In the relationship between Sigrid and Rashid, this crossing of boundaries only lies in one look, which remains the most intimate moment between them:

This time the light from her was focused on him. She was looking at him, and it was as though in that instant in which she looked up, that he came into being. A part of him that had been dead to the world was suddenly located; accurately, precisely charted.
(Mahjoub 1998: 248)

This moment of recognition, of human connection, causes Rashid immense pain, for it is the first time in the text that he allows himself to entertain the desire of not to be separated but to “embrace” (Mahjoub, 1998: 249). The text uses metaphorical language to show that there cannot be fulfilment of this desire as “to her sun, he was the hidden face of the moon”, constantly in the “shadows”, feeling “immobile” and “unworthy” of her knowledge (Mahjoub, 1998: 249). This highlights one of the most important passages in the text regarding the breaking of boundaries: “He is looking for a translation, a transformation, a change of form. A metamorphosis that would enable him to reach her” (Mahjoub, 1998: 249). This passage rather pessimistically acknowledges the vastly different worlds they inhabit and the impossibility of forming any kind of relationship other than that of sharing their knowledge. In other words, the transfer of knowledge which is such a positive form of cultural translation until this point in the narrative, might not be sufficient in its force to break down all boundaries. Rashid’s desire is as radical as the knowledge of heliocentricity, but the latter finds expression in communities of learning, whereas his relationship to Sigrid remains unacknowledged and unacknowledgable.

When knowledge production ceases and boundaries of what is permissible are enforced by the cruel intervention of the religious and civic leaders, Heinesen is the first to give up: “It was as though his very faith in man, and in himself, had been irrevocably shaken” (Mahjoub, 1998: 265). After Heinesen’s death, Rashid buries his “Muslim instrument of science, [...] with the body of this European as evidence of their having touched each other’s lives” (Cooper, 2006: 15). The box is Rashid’s special gift to Heinesen and his only precious possession. The knowledge that throughout Rashid’s life had been focussed on survival is turning

to something dangerous and it is at this point Mahjoub reveals in his character the first signs of resignation: “[Rashid] sits up and lifts the telescope in his hands and looks at it. He has been chasing a sarab, a mirage – science cannot lead us anywhere, but back to ourselves” (Mahjoub, 1998: 278). In the beautiful epilogue of the novel, Rashid stands on the winter beach, weighed down with all the manuscripts and instruments he managed to save from the fire at Heinesen’s farm like a “destitute warrior of ancient times” (Mahjoub, 1998: 277). Realising that he will not survive the cold carrying the heavy paper, Rashid decides to leave the books, the scrolls and the telescope behind. In a conversation with Sévry about Rashid, Mahjoub points out:

In his case, I think he is trying to understand something which involves a complete break with what he has believed in up until this point. At the end of the novel he opts for life, and this means leaving behind the evidence he has collected, the books and scrolls he has strapped to his body, the discovery he has made. He is unable to encompass all the contrasting elements at the same time, on the one hand his faith, and on the other his commitment to science. (Sévry, 2001: 87-88)

The ambiguous ending of the novel, which is poised between death and the hope of Rashid’s survival, of a “nameless ship waiting for him and a passage to work his way south”, emphasises that the most stubborn of scholars might not be able to carry his knowledge “back to the world he left behind” (Mahjoub, 1998: 278). Knowledge as a means of survival, a safe place, which affords the characters with relationships across boundaries is thus an ideal of the text but this is constantly threatened by the intervention of power, which relentlessly seeks to curtail cultural translation. Mahjoub thus answers the question of what happens to these translators in the context of prejudice, racism and power by showing their liminal positions as outcasts constantly in danger of extermination.

To conclude, *Wings of Dust* and *The Carrier* are novels in which the characters are inspired to transmit and hold on to the scholarly knowledge they gained, despite the futility of their act. In both novels, translation is seen as a tool for

transformation. But whereas in *The Carrier* translations happen and communities of scholars to some extent manage to cross boundaries of thought, religion and culture, in *Wings of Dust* this is less possible. Mahjoub compares this lack of translation with the political situation in the Sudan, where the characters try to

find a way of marrying their own cultural background with the new knowledge, and the emotional learning they acquired when they were in the West, to bring these two together to create a consistency out of this mess that they had been left with. *But the map of the independent state pushed together people who had no relationship with one another whatsoever, and who in many cases did not know each other.* (Mahjoub in Sévry 2001: 90, emphasis added)

In *Wings of Dust* translations would have to encompass the whole nation and as the quotation above expresses, this remains a dream of the few translators and carriers of knowledge who are very quickly silenced by the state. The translators in Mahjoub's narratives might be silenced but their stories are not. Mahjoub insists that writing from Africa and the Middle East is giving a "voice to the dispossessed, the silenced, the forgotten" and that the reader has the chance to listen to that voice (Mahjoub, 2002: 12). The narrative argues for, and enacts in the reading process, a politics of translation, of connections across boundaries. These instances of connections between men and women from worlds apart express Mahjoub's hope that literature offers the possibility to translate between diverse cultures and to open up cracks of colourful light between the text and the reader. It is not maps that one needs, as the opening quotation of this chapter suggests, but stories. Stories therefore, are the focus of the analysis in the next chapter on Abdulrazak Gurnah where storytelling and mimicry are compared as options for the migrant to translate the past into a liveable present.

Chapter Four

Mimicry or Translation: Storytelling and Migrant Identity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *By the Sea* (2001)

There were stories, in the first place, stories to fill the hours and the mind in the contest with life, to lift the ordinary into metaphor, to make it seem that the time of my passing was a choice in my hands, that there was method in the manner of my coming and my going. That is what stories can do, they can push the feeble disorders we live with out of sight. (Gurnah, 1996: 120)

I needed to be shriven of the burden of events and *stories which I have never been able to tell, and which by telling would fulfil the craving I feel to be listened to with understanding*. He was my shriver, and I knew I would tell him what he asked of me. Then after telling him, I would have found a good place to stop and tell him that even Shahrazad managed to get some rest every sunrise. (Gurnah, 2001: 171, emphasis added)

Migrant storytelling in the contest with life: Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels, *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*, explore the discursive strategies open to migrants to negotiate diasporic identities in their new country of domicile, England. The novels capture the ambivalent subject positions of narrators caught between the post-independence turmoil of their homeland, Zanzibar, and the radically different environment in which they find themselves. In this chapter it is argued that the kind of stories the East African Asian narrators tell, and the way they tell them, differ in the two novels. It is the difference between what Bhabha refers to as mimicry and translation, which determines the possibility of creating a transnational diasporic identity that affords the characters with a space, which one could tentatively call 'home'. Bhabha defines mimicry as the colonial power's "desire to create a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is *almost the same but not quite*" (Bhabha, 1994: 86, emphasis added). The migrants become mimics in that

they are educated in English but nonetheless lack “cultural capital” which would transform them into the European citizen they resemble (Bourdieu, 1984: 13). Bhabha explains that a mimic man is someone “Indian [African] in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”, easily controlled and co-opted into colonial administration (Bhabha, 1994: 87). However, Bhabha reclaims mimicry for the postcolonial migrant and suggests that the irony and parody of being “Anglicized” but definitely not “English” opens up the space for resistance to colonial power (Bhabha, 1994: 87). Gurnah’s texts will highlight the instability of mimicry as a strategy of resistance while also revealing its limitations and colluding silences. Against this ambiguity of mimicry, Gurnah sets translation as the bearing across of stories that speak of experiences not solely defined by their relationship to the West.

In the earlier novel, *Admiring Silence*, the narrator is engaged in resistance through mimicry. The two narrators of *By the Sea*, however, translate their past in East Africa into the present in England and this process, as the narrative structure of the novel suggests, enables them to form relationships that transcend the opposition between hostile host and threatening immigrant. The analysis of the two works suggests that there is a development from the earlier novel, with its pessimistic outlook on the possibility of intercultural encounter, to the later text where Gurnah explores translation as a process of, to borrow Asad’s words again, “learning to live another form of life and to speak another kind of language” (Asad, 1986: 149). This kind of cultural translation is not an easy process as the narrators struggle with the asymmetrical relations of power manifest in the institutions they have to deal with in Britain.

As African Asians, the narrators of both novels are doubly displaced. Since independence and the violent uprising in Zanzibar in 1964, East Africans of Arab or Asian descent are not regarded as “African” enough in independent Tanzania (Joseph, 1999: 1-7). Thus their citizenship is threatened, and this often leads them to migrate. Lewis argues that the diasporic identity of Gurnah’s characters,

like Vassanji's, have "more to do with a shared sense of homelessness than with a shared sense of home" (Lewis, 1999: 217). This is important, as it suggests reasons for both mimicry and translation. The traumatic experience of being in flight from 'home' results in the narrator's complete alienation in *Admiring Silence*, suggesting that his recourse to mimicry might be a desperate attempt to cling to a discourse that, at least initially, is favoured by the hostile environment in England. In *By the Sea*, the narrators are equally traumatised yet they refuse, through re-translating their experiences of past and departure, to be defined solely by others, be it as non-citizens after independence or as immigrants in the UK. Both mimicry and translation are thus strategies of survival.

In *Admiring Silence* Gurnah chooses a narrator who mimics the voice of the westerner, the neo-colonialist, and thus becomes "almost the same" as his interlocutors. The slippage of "not quite" creates the space for the narrator to subvert such disabling discourse, and through clever irony he exposes imperial and xenophobic myths about the African Other. However, the narrative space of the "spectacle" that is recreated in mimicry is a site of ambivalence as the narrator is stripped of identity even as he remains the enunciating subject. Ndebele defines "spectacle" as "the complete exteriority of everything: the dramatic contrasts all over the story, the lack of specificity of place and character so that we have spectacular ritual instantly turned into symbol, with instant meaning [...]" (Ndebele, 1991: 43). Caught in this position, the narrator cannot translate his past into the present; his youth in East Africa is not connected to his life in London. Gurnah's novel shows that these 'empire stories', even though they expose the hypocrisy of the host culture, do not provide enough grounding for the narrator to create a transnational diasporic identity. As the crafty mimic and jester, the narrator remains on the periphery of the social sphere, suffering from disconnection and dislocation. In the later novel, *By the Sea*, it is translation, rather than the refusal to translate, that affords the characters a life where past and present connect and hold a future.

Both narrators in *By the Sea* tell stories of their journeys from East Africa to England, stressing the interdependency between old and new and thus foregrounding the processes of cross-cultural exchange. This cross-cultural negotiation can best be explained by using the concept of translation, literally as well as metaphorically, for understanding how the foreign and the familiar intersect in every form of cultural production, in this case, storytelling.

The translation from one language to another can serve as a model for the movement, the act of carrying across, that both narrators engage in when telling stories about their migration journey. This interpretation draws on Benjamin's understanding of the relationship between the original and its reproduction in translation, whereby the original is moved from a particular context into a completely different one in the target language. This movement grants the original "continued life" elsewhere and hence Benjamin does not lament the loss inherent in the translatory process but rather stresses the possibilities of new meanings, transforming and continuing the original (Benjamin, 1968: 71). Here the word 'translation' does not only refer to linguistic matter but also, or even mainly, to "modes of thought that are embodied in such matter" (Asad, 1986: 142). Gurnah's texts then can be read as case studies of the way migrants translate between the host culture and their source culture through narrative itself. In translation, as in migration, the process of departure and arrival are never complete and it is in the temporary enunciations between them that meaning emerges. Gurnah's texts thus contribute to the conversation of this thesis an important focus on the telling of life-stories and how these stories influence migrants' perceptions of themselves and their environments.

The migrant storytelling in Gurnah's novel, *By the Sea*, functions as one such site of enunciation, where 'translation' across time and space creates a present for the narrators. The two East African narrators, Saleh and Latif, meet in an English seaside town to translate their often very painful stories of departure into a shared present and thus resist self-pity and isolation. In his essay 'On Exile', Said

points out that much of the exile's life is "taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule" (Said, 1994a: 144). Gurnah's narrators engage in exactly that: they tell stories in order to construct a liveable present for themselves, but the success of this new world can be contrasted in the two novels. In *Admiring Silence* the narrator does not seem to be able to surmount the loss experienced through his displacement and therefore repeats stories of an old world. By examining both novels and their narrators in detail, this chapter explores the relationship between migrancy, translation and narrative.

"Beware the stories you read or tell": Admiring Silence

In *Admiring Silence* [...] Gurnah again leaves his ending wide open, and [...] uses physical and emotional flight as a metaphor for the insoluble internal shuttling between national and personal affiliations. (Lewis, 1999: 220)

Gurnah's novel is indeed about the "insoluble internal shuttling" of the migrant protagonist. In contrast to the migrants in Vassanji's fiction (which will be discussed in chapter five) the narrator of *Admiring Silence* does not have recourse to supporting communities. This means that for this particular migrant neither national nor personal affiliations offer respite from the "flight" from home. On the contrary, most meaningful affiliations are severed by the end of the narrative, leaving the protagonist suspended in his liminal position of not belonging. This position results in the stories he tells about himself, which ultimately curb his possibilities of imagining a positive space to inhabit. It is in this sense that Okri's warning – "beware the stories you hear or tell" – points to the significance and power of stories to define and shape the social relations the migrant is part of but has so little control over (Okri, 1997: 120). Speaking about the self in stories can be potentially empowering but it can also precipitate an annihilation of one's world, which is what happens in *Admiring Silence*. A reason for this near annihilation of the protagonist lies in his telling of stories that are not true, but fabrications he makes up to please his audience.

The narrator's unreliable disposition and manner of framing the story can be read as symptomatic of his position as an immigrant in London. The disjointed ordering of the story, the many stories within the story and the centrality of storytelling are elements of a condition which reflect what Said terms the "fundamentally discontinuous state of being" of any person living outside their home country (Said, 1994a: 137). From the narrator's inability to locate a point of departure for his story (he does not announce a beginning until page 17), the reader can infer that the effort to invent this 'new world' places quite a burden on the narrator. Gurnah plays with "stories, narrative theory, lies and silences" in this novel to point out the inability of the main character to "find any stable ground" beneath his feet. As a result his various flights are "ever away from, never towards (or even between) homes", evidenced also by the fractured shape of the narrative (Lewis, 1999: 222, 226).

Admiring Silence is not narrated in chronological order: it jumps between different time periods in the life of the narrator and his family. The novel is narrated by an unnamed middle-aged teacher, originally from Zanzibar, who lives in London with his English partner, Emma, and their teenage daughter, Amelia. Emma's suburban parents, Mr and Mrs Willoughby, are shocked by her relationship with an African Asian and only want to hear 'empire stories' from him, fictional romantic tales of Africa and its colonial past. In spite of all these stories of harmony and hospitality, the narrator has not heard from his family since his departure, nor has he written to tell them of his daughter and Emma. When the political barriers come down, he decides to travel to see his family, only to end up feeling alienated at 'home'. The ramshackle reality of post-independence Zanzibar unsettles him and he understands that a sense of belonging for him is not connected to a particular place. Rather it is his relationship to Emma, "the secretest, most complete, most real part" of himself, which anchors him (Gurnah, 1996: 170). However, after his return to England, Emma tells him that she wants to end their relationship. Interestingly, this rejection of the protagonist is also couched in narrative terms:

She told me her life was a narrative which had refused closure, that she was now at the beginning of another story, one which she was choosing for herself, not a tale she had stumbled into and then could not find a way out of. Clever Emma. I wish I could *unhear* what she said, so that my silences are not filled with her words and her voice. (Gurnah, 1996: 210, emphasis added)

The irony of this passage lies in Emma's description of their seventeen years together as a "tale she had stumbled into" out of which she could escape only now. "Tale" here suggests the persuasive powers of narratives that weave a yarn, imprison the listener in the maze where there is no way out. Emma thus lays the blame squarely on the nameless narrator's storytelling which she now will substitute with a story of her own. Since the narrator does not have much to offer but his stories, this is a particularly cruel way to end their relationship. The novel concludes with his despair and loneliness.

The disorderly and often dishonest narration of fabricated stories of the protagonist can be interpreted as an effect of his dual life: his childhood and youth in Zanzibar and his adult life in England. These two places are never integrated but positioned as opposites in the narrative, and this does not allow for simple beginnings or endings. While in England the narrator feels as though he is alien, and is at one point "astonished by the sudden loneliness and terror" of this foreign place (Gurnah, 1996: 83). However, he is equally uncomfortable in his homeland, embarrassed by his family's attempt to arrange a marriage for him and repulsed by the farcical politics of post-independence. When the Prime Minister attempts to woo him into staying on in Zanzibar, the narrator is not touched by the false flattery (Lewis, 1999: 221). In fact, he recognises that the Prime Minister's attention to him and his family points to the political instability of independent Zanzibar:

If, with all that was waiting for him to do, our chief found time to concern himself with the intimate and pathetic doings of my existence [...], then there was little else to do but hope

that the funding from the Scandinavian cultural institute would turn up and keep the ramshackle ship of state afloat. If our chief, who was rumoured to be the best of them, could only fill his head with such gossip, nothing could be expected of the rest. (Gurnah, 1996: 202)

He longs to be back in England with Emma, his partner. He is unable to obtain a sense of belonging no matter what his physical location. The reader can see that the narrator is neither able to appreciate each place separately, nor reconcile their relationship in order to piece together the story of his life. This refusal to 'translate the self' between his past and present disallows the narrator's future as it curtails the continued life which a translation grants the original. Gurnah, through his bewildered narrator, subtly questions an overly optimistic attitude to exile, which is so often seen as a "potent, even enriching motif of modern culture" (Suleiman, 1998: 2).

Storytelling is the crucial aspect of the novel's narrative framing. The novel is structured as a set of stories, within the larger story of his life. He tells the readers a series of stories in order to introduce his childhood as he describes it to Emma. He recounts in detail his past life in Zanzibar, and it is not until the readers are well into the book that they discover that his stories are not true, but rather represent what he perceives his audience wants to hear. The narrator is an artist of imitation, of mimicry, and Gurnah highlights the role that mimicry plays in shaping the nature of the relationship between the exile and his object of imitation. As the story unfolds, both the devastating and empowering effects of mimicry are revealed. The narrator reasons that it must be his displacement in English society that gives him the ability to fabricate his stories:

For my alienness was important to all of us – as their [Emma's friends] alienness was to me. It adorned them with the liberality of their friendly embrace of me, and adorned me with authority over the whole world south of the Mediterranean and east of the Atlantic. *It was from these beginnings that it became necessary to invent stories of orderly affairs and tragic failure.* (Gurnah, 1996: 62, emphasis added)

Through the stories he tells, the narrator eventually alienates those around him. Emma is particularly angry about the 'empire stories' he tells to her father, Mr Willoughby, who believes them because they repeat a 'homegrown' discourse on the colonies. What becomes obvious is that even though these stories are misrepresentations of reality, Mr Willoughby, whose own identity is reflected in them, does not afford the narrator the space to tell other stories. He derives great satisfaction from having his own discourse repeated and confirmed by a "darkie" and it is quite clear that this satisfaction is all he requires from his 'son-in-law'; there is no genuine wish to interact. The fact that the narrator is never called by his name emphasises his depersonalised position.

In other words, there seems to be ambivalence in Mr Willoughby's perception of the narrator. On the one hand he becomes an original source of information but on the other there is a clear distinction between 'them' and 'us':

'I expect there are thousands of darkies in universities these days. It wasn't like that in my day. Perhaps the odd maharaja's son, or a young chief. The rest were too backward, I suppose. Now you see *them* everywhere' (Gurnah, 1996: 20, emphasis in original).

In providing these stories, the narrator becomes the agent of typical neocolonial discourse. He therefore joins the 'us', if only temporarily and never completely. What is captured in detail in this novel is the ambiguity of subject positions within post-colonial speech. For it is the East African Asian who facilitates the process of mis-recognition. By re-enacting colonial speech and by repeating the dominant relations of power and knowledge, the narrator, in Bhabha's words, assumes an "ambivalent identification – black skin, white masks" out of which strategies of political subversion can emerge. For the "depersonalised, dislocated colonial subject can become an incalculable object, quite literally difficult to place" (Bhabha, 1994: 62). Moreover, the repetition of the "same" can be its own "displacement" (Bhabha, 1994: 137). The narrator assumes the part of the perpetual mimic, always imitating the words and actions required by the people who surround him. This has to do with his enormous sense of alienation upon

arrival in England. In order to combat feelings of intimidation the narrator tries to assimilate, and his relationship with Emma is highly symbolic of this process. It is Emma who rescues him from his misery, filling his life with acceptance and meaning and at the same time transforming him into a mimic:

She drew me into her circle of friendship so completely that at times I forgot myself and I imagined *that I looked as they did, and talked as they did and had lived the same life that they had lived* and that I had always been like this and would go unhindered way beyond the sunset. (Gurnah, 1996: 61-62, my emphasis)

This more general form of mimicry – pretending to be the same as the people who surround him – testifies to the character's wish to assimilate, not to be different any more. Zygmunt Bauman, in his essay 'Assimilation into Exile' makes an interesting observation about assimilation:

What makes [...] exile an unreal place is the daily effort to make it real – that is, to cleanse it of all things that are out of place. In exile one is pressed to stop being in exile; either by moving elsewhere or by dissolving into the place, not being anymore out of it. The latter is the pressure of assimilation. (Bauman, 1998: 321)

The narrator cannot dissolve into the place despite his desire to do so, because of the awareness of his difference, constantly re-inscribed by the covert aggression of Emma's parents and by the children he teaches. All his attempts at telling stories can be understood in terms of creating a reality in which one has a part to play that is not defined by difference but by belonging. Gurnah disallows his narrator success; the narrator fails, because the hostile environment prefers his lies and fabrications over and above the modest truth.

What Gurnah's novel reveals is precisely that the effect of mimicry is two sided: in one sense it strips the narrator of identity but in another it empowers him into a unique position from which he can critique his object of imitation. The limitations of his politics of resistance through his storytelling, however, can be seen by the continuous erosion of the narrator's sense of self in the novel. Gurnah shows

how the voice from the margins can subvert notions of cultural superiority but questions the satisfaction or rewards of such a subversive discourse for the narrator. Mimicry gives the narrator some voice and agency, but the lack of narrative closure questions the value of this kind of voice and agency. At the end of the novel, the text emphasises Bhabha's observation that mimicry is never far from menace (Bhabha, 1994: 91). The stories the narrator tells do not function as a cathartic experience, but rather precipitate a dissociation of the self from its social environment, even if the narrator seeks to achieve the opposite. Gurnah's novel thus makes clear that mimicry might afford the narrator a small space of resistance. For example, he might laugh silently at his audience's foolishness, but the limitations are evident immediately. This silent laughter cannot find an open outlet, because then his audience would not want to hear his stories, if they realised he is making fun of them. While the narrator is trapped in mimicry, the text itself becomes an ironic and powerful indictment of racial stereotyping and neo-colonial discourse.

The most striking instances of narrative mimicry can be found in the 'empire stories' which will now be examined in some detail. Each tale is meticulously crafted to be a hyperbolic mocking impersonation of misguided post-colonial assessments. The narrator tells Mr Willoughby

that the government had legalized cannibalism. I told him that the President had syphilis, and was reliably reputed to be schizophrenic; he was practically blind and was drunk by about three in the afternoon. (Gurnah, 1996: 21)

The stereotypes that are invoked here – of the sexual licence of the African, the savagery of cannibalism and lack of moral fibre and control – construct the Other as an object of derision. Bhabha points out, however, that in colonial discourse stereotypes are ambivalent and the Other is an object of both derision as well as desire: "The chain of stereotypical signification is curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, an articulation of multiple belief" (Bhabha, 1994:

82)¹. The narrator's participation in his own stereotyping as an object of derision and desire does not undermine the power of the stereotype in an immediate sense. It is only the reader who sees the scathing critique of the stereotype.

Mr Willoughby's disproportionate need to hear these stories indicates emotional desire and derision simultaneously invoked by the stereotype. Gurnah points to the two-fold consequence of this for the narrator. He is needed and esteemed as the provider of this fulfilment, but since it is inherently narcissistic, Mr Willoughby never acknowledges the personhood of the narrator. Storytelling is the only avenue of expression that is open to the narrator, his political resistance very much confined and restricted.

As in the first empire story of Africa as savage, the next empire story parodies what Mudimbe identifies as the search for the "exotic and primitive" (Mudimbe, 1988: 69). Just as Mr Willoughby believes what the narrator said about the president, he believes in the opulence, dignity and nobility of the narrator's household: "I said that in my father's house all the beds were made out of gold, and until I was sixteen, servants bathed me in milk and then rinsed me in coconut water every morning" (Gurnah, 1996: 22).

The stereotypes of the noble savage and the exotic riches of gold, milk and coconut water are reminiscent of edenic conditions of Paradise. What this also suggests is the possibility of attaining those riches for the empire. In the absurdity of the protagonist's imitation, the legitimacy of western authority is challenged: "what emerges [...] is a writing, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable" (Bhabha, 1994: 87-88). In a role reversal, western historiography becomes the subject of the exile's scrutiny. Mimicry thus

¹ Bhabha further writes that "the black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces" (Bhabha, 1994: 82).

contains the possibility of resistance while at the same time constricting the narrator.

Another story the narrator invents for his captive listener deals with colonial education and parodies what Mudimbe identifies as the perception of the "hierarchy of civilizations" (Mudimbe, 1988: 69). In a beautiful yard the children are waiting for their free milk, the teachers walking "among [them] uttering soft spoken greetings and a quiet word of approbation where it was deserved" (Gurnah, 1996: 25). Then they get lovely fruit to eat and flavoured milk to drink, to prepare them for their lessons "to break the chains of ignorance and disease which had kept [them] in darkness for so long, and which the Empire had come to bring [them] respite from" (Gurnah, 1996: 25). The combination of ignorance, illness and the stereotype of 'dark Africa' in this story positions the empire as the solution to these conditions.

The narrator's imitation of the colonial voice reveals the extent to which modern conceptions of non-western people exclude the agency of those they aim to depict. The absurdity of his simulation questions the authority of these traditional colonial representations while fixing the narrator to such representations. This absurdity is illustrated in the story about an English hospital sister saving the narrator's life while he visited his aunt who was succumbing to "a complex amalgam of bush yaws, leprosy, bilharzia and infectious boils, all of which are brought on by inherited effects of dissipation and lasciviousness" (Gurnah, 1996: 30). On his way out of the hospital, the narrator is overcome by "tropical ague":

[The] sister found me and had me carried to a bed. She did not leave my side until I was fully recovered two weeks later, bathing my brow with watered wine, and placing her handkerchief in my mouth so I could drink. (Gurnah, 1996: 30)

Contrasted to the well-deserved illness (due to lasciviousness) is the altruism of the nursing sister, a member of the empire, who is kind and good to the patient. Again the narrator gives Mr Willoughby a story where his own perceptions of the

colony are parodied. These stories create a strong emotional response in Mr Willoughby that is indicative of his identification with the civilising mission:

He sat with his eyes lowered, his hand clenched around his glass, shaking his head now and then as the scale of the tragedy returned to him. 'It wasn't right, to abandon them like that,' he said. 'Cruel. Think of all the terrible things they've been doing to each other since we left. (Gurnah, 1996: 26)

Here we see Mr Willoughby imitating the discourse of the natives as children who need a guiding adult, that is the empire, to help them sort out the situation; the narrator promptly takes this cue to continue with the last story, and summarises the benefits of colonial rule:

Under the Empire we had firm and fair rule, governed by people who understood us better than we understood ourselves. Even at the worst of times, when what seemed harsh edicts were being issued, we knew they were for our own good, to force us into the light of civil society. They brought medical knowledge and care, both to succour our ills and wean us from superstition and evil spirits. But above all, the Empire selflessly brought us knowledge and education and civilization. (Gurnah, 1996: 73)

The irony of all these stories is emphasised by Mr Willoughby's grotesque, larger-than-life belief in them. Domestic representations of Africa as savage, primitive and exotic provide narcissistic pleasure to Mr Willoughby, bordering on the disturbing. Particularly since they are expressed into the face of the African narrator, whose position veers between disappearance (no name, no genuine stories) and the enunciatory power he yields as the source of information. The stories of the narrator thus can be seen in terms of what Venuti defines as translations which domesticate otherness (Venuti 1995: 9, 1992: 5). Venuti argues that the reader of such a translation is positioned as a "domestic subject":

As translation constructs a domestic representation for a foreign text and culture, it simultaneously constructs a domestic subject, a position of intelligibility that is also an

ideological position, shaped by codes and canons, interests and agendas of certain domestic social groups. (Venuti, 1992: 10)

The text positions us, the readers, as the domestic subject alongside Mr Willoughby. This interpellation of the reader who does not want to be positioned ideologically alongside Mr Willoughby creates the dramatic irony of the text and serves as a powerful critique of domesticating otherness. The narrator, though occupying an abject position, is nevertheless the agent of the enunciation which “attempts repeatedly to reinscribe and relocate the political claim to cultural priority and hierarchy (high/low, ours/theirs) in the social institution of the signifying activity” (Bhabha, 1994: 177). Even though the narrator gives voice to the neocolonial discourse, the fact remains that *his telling* mimics this process of domestication. The narrative space of the spectacle is a site of ambivalence as the narrator, who occupies the position of ‘objectified other’ and of the enunciating subject, makes a fool of Mr Willoughby.

Mr Willoughby’s unreflecting and uncritical gullibility, which never questions the ambivalence of the narrator’s relationship to these stories, makes a mockery of the discourse, and it is Emma, at first criticising her parents’ “obscene complacency” and their voicing of “racist filth”, who eventually points this out (Gurnah, 1996: 72). She later protests that the narrator is overdoing it: “You’re exploiting his gullibility and making a fool of him” (Gurnah, 1996: 74). Bhabha maintains that repeating colonial discourse back at the source can turn “the authority of culture into its own non-sense” (Bhabha, 1994: 137). This nonsense is obvious when the narrator positions Mr Willoughby as the fool who believes and relishes it, proving how mimicry can be a strategy of resistance, albeit limited. The appeal of these stories for Mr Willoughby exceeds ordinary storytelling – there is the hint of prurient obsession and compulsion that is expressed in body language. As soon as the narrator starts to tell these stories Mr Willoughby “leans forward with interest, his face alight, eyes burning with attention” and “his lips would part with poignant enthrallment” (Gurnah, 1996: 22,

74). Emma and her mother cease to be part of this “conspiracy” and the men wait until they are alone to start the storytelling and satisfy Mr Willoughby’s “hunger”:

Mr Willoughby was only interested in my Empire stories. It made me wonder how he could have got through his life so far without the steady supply I provided him with, but perhaps I misjudged his resourcefulness. I could see the hunger in his eyes every time we met, and before long he'd find a way of creating an opening for me. (Gurnah, 1996: 73)

Mr Willoughby cannot be taken seriously. This is another reason for the limits of mimicry as resistance, because what good is it to critique a fool? More serious is the fact that Emma, in much different ways to her father, also positions the narrator as a mimic. Gurnah uses the relationship between the narrator and Emma to show that, in the end, rather than creating a present, in which they both can be ‘at home’, the narrator’s stories only serve to highlight his own alienation. Emma reminds him towards the end of their relationship that

‘Because, you see, you can't change the story while you are in it, and therefore it follows certainly, without question or doubt, that you can't achieve anything by saying NO to what happens in it. The story exists because it has to, and it needs you to be these things so we can know who we are’. [...] This was where my narcissism lay, I suppose, in my desire to insert myself in a self-flattering discourse which required that England be guilty and decadent, instead playing my part as well and as silently as Pocahontas. (Gurnah, 1996: 15)

In the few instances where the narrator tries to say *no* to the empire stories that are required of him, Emma maintains that he relishes the role of the victim too much.

At first though, these stories afford them intimacy, and Emma, a PhD student specialising in narrative theories, derives enjoyment from them: “above all it made her happy [...] she never seemed to tire of hearing about my home and my people” (Gurnah, 1996: 33). Through these stories the narrator gives sense to his

two lives; he tells stories to “straighten out my record to myself, to live up to her account of me, to construct a history closer to my choice” (Gurnah, 1996: 62). Clearly the narrator is engaged in the project of what Said calls the “creation of a New World” (Said, 1994a). However, Emma loses interest and she catches the narrator “in an inconsistency” which makes him feel “like a beached creature” (Gurnah, 1996: 63). The translation between Zanzibar and London fails as the narrator gets entangled in his web of stories, which elide any orderly pattern, despite the narrator’s efforts to use them to structure and gain purpose to his life:

There were stories, in the first place, stories to fill the hours and the mind in the contest with life, to lift the ordinary into metaphor, to make it seem that the time of my passing was a choice in my hands, that there was method in the manner of my coming and my going. *That is what stories can do, they can push the feeble disorders we live with out of sight.* (Gurnah, 1996: 119-120, my emphasis)

This quotation powerfully illustrates the narrator’s hope, which underlies all his stories, that the meaning of his life can be fashioned beyond the constant “insoluble internal shuffling” that is part of his “flight from home” (Lewis, 1999: 222). Initially, as his listeners are happy with these stories, the narrator of the novel seems to succeed, but soon the “feeble disorders” push back into his life with a vengeance. This is precisely the position of the exile who might create “heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes” but these are all efforts “to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement” (Said, 1994a: 137). It is thus significant that the author chooses to start and end the novel with reflections of the narrator’s weakness. At the start of the novel the reader is told about his “buggered heart” and right at the end he is heartbroken, as Emma and his daughter Amelia have left him. This structural repetition is linked to the repetition of the story of two other exiles: Pocahontas and Sir John (Gurnah 1996: 6, 213).

The narrator recounts the story of Pocahontas meeting John Smith and ultimately being taken to England where she becomes a curiosity and dies soon thereafter. The narrator interjects that maybe she should not have inserted herself “into

stories of Empire” and that “perhaps she would have done better to stay at home” (Gurnah, 1996: 6-7). At the end of the story he draws a comparison between Pocahontas and Sir John, who was also exiled. Unlike Pocahontas “whose destiny crossed with England’s and who died evily in one of its many swamps, Sir John was a real Englishman” whose expulsion from the country was not met with oppression or alienation (Gurnah 1996: 213). It is clear from the story that the narrator suffers from the same fate as Pocahontas. Gurnah uses irony to alert the reader that the narrator should heed his own words about not “inserting” himself into stories of empire.

The narrator’s identification with Pocahontas is reflected in the self-portrait he paints as a weak and lost man and it is clear throughout the narrative that he cannot overcome his emotional despondency. This mirrors Said’s statement that exile’s “sadness can never be surmounted” (Said, 1994a: 137). In this novel, it is only through mimicry that the narrator, in his state of alienation, can ‘belong’ and Gurnah points out that that might not be enough for relationships to survive. The paradox of this liminal position of the narrator paints a sinister picture of the possibilities for the immigrant to ever ‘fit in’ with the hostile environment. The reader is left with the tiniest glimmer of hope that the narrator might be able to form a relationship with Ira, a fellow traveller on the flight back to England, who is similarly positioned as the narrator. Born of Indian parents in Nairobi, she and her family left East Africa after independence and moved to Britain. There she was subjected to racism and let down by her English husband, like the narrator is let down by Emma. Ira’s rootlessness links her to the narrator, who right at the end of the novel contemplates whether he should phone her: “So now I sit here, with the phone in my lap, thinking I shall call Ira and ask if she would like to see a movie. But I am so afraid of disturbing this fragile silence” (Gurnah, 1996: 217). Gurnah thus points to a possible affiliation for the narrator, that is characterised by the absence of national ties (to East Africa and England) and emphasises the fragile, in-betweenness of the migrants. The reader also knows that with Ira, the narrator can cease to be the mimic, because their encounter is framed by a frank

truthfulness. This novel ends with the potential for stories that are truer translations of the past, but this potential is explored more fully and centrally in Gurnah's next novel, *By the Sea*.

"Stories can transform enemies into friends": By the Sea

It was as if they [the coloniser] had remade us, and in ways that we no longer had any recourse but to accept, so complete and well-fitting was the story they told about us. The stories we knew about ourselves before they took charge of us seemed medieval and fanciful, sacred and secret myths [...]. But they left too many spaces unattended to, could not in the nature of things do anything about them, so in time gaping holes began to appear in the story. It began to fray and unravel under assault. (Gurnah, 2001: 18)

Stories can destroy civilizations, can win wars, can lose them, can conquer hearts by the millions, can transform enemies into friends, [...], can sow the seeds of the creation of empires, can undo them. (Okri, 1997: 119-20)

In his later novel, *By the Sea*, Gurnah shows that storytelling as translation rather than mimicry affords the characters the connection between past and present which holds a future. In this novel the two main characters, Latif Mahmud and Saleh Omar, are both exiles who cannot return home to Zanzibar, though for different reasons. Latif Mahmud, published poet, professor of literature, translator and voluntary refugee, lives quietly and alone in his bleak London flat, bitter about the country and family he has never revisited after he left as a young man. Saleh Omar, on the other hand, barely escaped Zanzibar's post-independent turmoil alive: he was dispossessed of his furniture shop, imprisoned for eleven years, and eventually escaped leaving behind a dead wife and daughter. He arrives in England as an old man, initially claiming silence as his only protection. Both characters narrate different parts of the novel, which is not chronologically ordered, reflecting the interruption and disconnection inflicted by dispossession, persecution and exile.

Early in the novel in a moving description of Latif's bleeding feet in thin canvas shoes in the German winter and of Elleke's care of his wound, Gurnah links an act of human kindness to storytelling. Kindness and storytelling are similar in that they rely on a dialogic relationship between a giver and receiver; storytelling cannot happen in isolation:

She tore the rag into three or four pieces, and put one of the pieces in the bowl of water and started to wash the sole of my foot. The water was cold, but the sensation was soothing. After a moment or two she said, 'There's nothing in there, I don't think.' Then she put a clean rag in the bowl and wiped the rest of my foot, between the toes, the instep, the back of the heel. She tore another rag into strips and dressed my wound, smiling and squatting on her heels when it was all done.

'I thought I would meet you, although I didn't know it would be you,' she said. [...] If an elderly German woman who looked as if she was once beautiful was squatting on the floor in front of you, after having washed your wound, and then said that, looking quite unperturbed [...] as she said it, you would feel in the midst of significance. *I believe so, you would feel at the beginning of a story. I did, anyway.* (Gurnah, 2001: 127, emphasis added)

This passage indicates that only when the migrant is recognised as a person worthy of care and attention, is there room for storytelling as translation, not mimicry. This kind of storytelling always leads to human connections and cross-cultural relationships, because of its nature of complicity in the telling and hearing of the tale. In this instance, Latif becomes the listener to Elleke's colourful and traumatic past experiences of her families' flight from Nazism and the authoritarian degradations of the GDR. The unlikely and wonderful encounter of a young Tanzanian student with a wise German woman and the stories of suffering they share from their so very different backgrounds is an early echo of the storytelling between Latif and Saleh later on in the novel. For both characters storytelling is a means of survival. Gurnah makes explicit that storytelling can ensure that some sense of dignity is preserved despite the degradations of suffering.

The narratives of the two characters in *By the Sea* provide different interpretations of their entangled family history as well as cross-cultural stories of living in England. Gurnah explores a complex and ambivalent world where notions of home, citizenship, family, language and exile are constantly interrogated and questioned by the interwoven and sometimes parallel storytelling of the two narrators. The author prises apart binaries and draws attention to what Brah calls the “multi-locationality [of characters] within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries” (Brah, 1996: 197). As such, the novel is a complex set of translations, forcing the characters to try and make sense of their multi-locationality.

Translation, literally as well as figuratively, plays an important part in this novel of departures and tentative arrivals. Literally, Latif is called by the immigration service to translate for Saleh, who pretends not to know any English:

Some while back someone had left a message on my office answering machine to ask if I could help translate in the case of an old man who had just arrived from Zanzibar as an asylum-seeker and could not speak English. The speaker said that she had been told that I understood the language they spoke there. (Gurnah, 2001: 73)

Latif is therefore assigned the role of cultural broker, equally competent in Swahili and English. This benign gesture by the official immigration people, who have a naïve understanding of translation, is contrasted in the text with the asymmetrical power relations which exist between languages. Both in Zanzibar, itself a polyglot environment, as well as in England, translations between languages hint at the complex negotiations of identity within and across boundaries, oscillating between what can, and what cannot, be translated across difference.

Figuratively, translation can also be understood as describing the processes of movement between the cultures of the place of departure and the cultures encountered in the host society – processes which are inextricably part of the migration experience. In his article ‘How Newness Enters the World’, Bhabha

describes this as the “liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one; there it no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently enjoined in the ‘survival’ of migrant life” (Bhabha, 1994: 224). Bhabha understands the zone of cultural difference, the in-between spaces of migrant experience, as translation, an overlapping and movement between differences. Thus he avoids both the assimilationist rhetoric of the postcolonial metropole and the resurgence of minority cultures, stressing rather the “ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity” (Bhabha, 1994: 224). Gurnah’s *By the Sea* engages with this understanding of translation through the narratives of the two protagonists.

In translation, emphasis is placed on the original text. Applying a similar notion to this novel requires looking at the notion of home, the East African original social context, the place of departure for both characters. Home, a safe place of belonging, where one can engage freely in the “performance of citizenship”, should enable people to actively participate in the “public realm” and recognise them as “authentic citizens” (Joseph, 1999: 4-5). Gurnah’s text about forced exile obviously undermines such a positive view of ‘home’. Interestingly, this had not stopped Saleh from hoping for a better future for Zanzibar, a hope expressed in his wish to name his long hoped-for baby daughter “Raiiya”, which means “citizen” in Arabic (Gurnah, 2001: 150). With this gesture he attempted to “make her life an utterance, a demand that our rulers should treat us with humanity, as indigenes and citizens of the land of our birth” (Gurnah, 2001: 150). This direct staging of citizenship is shattered when the baby daughter dies a little over a year later. By then Saleh has already been imprisoned by order of the country’s rulers. He has become a ‘noncitizen’ without the right for a fair trial and it is made clear in the novel that his escape and exile in England are little short of a miracle.

Saleh Omar’s fate is, to a large extent, the result of an act of revenge on the part of Latif’s parents, who felt that Saleh had taken away their possessions out of ill will. The families’ enmity began when Latif’s family home became Saleh’s by

right. The feud between the two families had started when Hussein, a Persian trader, had come to Saleh Omar's furniture shop asking for a sizeable loan, against which he offered Saleh, as security, a paper for Rajab Shaaban's house. Hussein does not pay back the loan and Saleh, in need of money, dispossesses the Shaaban family. Latif is a young boy when this happens, but ever since the arrival of Hussein the trader, he had not experienced his home as a safe place. Before the repossession, Hussein stays with Latif's family and starts a more than platonic relationship with Hassan, Latif's older brother. As a result, Hassan becomes moody and silent, severing the close ties linking him to his younger brother, who had so far looked up to him for guidance: "Hassan was six years older than me, and in the early years of my life he was the source of everything I desired. He gave me love and reassurance" (Gurnah, 2001: 79). This relationship with his brother is particularly important to Latif, as their mother has a number of affairs: "I just feared as I looked at her... and that perfume she wore has always made me think of bedrooms and intrigue, a ripe kind of shame" (Gurnah, 2001: 80). It is perhaps not surprising under the circumstances that the Shaaban family should quickly seize their chance to blame all their misfortune on Saleh Omar. Latif, however, does not know that his own parents and brother were later largely responsible for Saleh's imprisonment, and he only hears this part of the story when the two men eventually meet in England.

These personal histories mean that, for both Latif and Saleh, home ceases to be home long before they set out on their journeys. Interestingly, both narrators differ in their translations of their entwined past in East Africa, offering different versions of their family enmity, which elide simple notions of culprit and victim. Their mutual engagement in re-translating and thus re-assessing their past through storytelling becomes possible as a result of their exile, which provides enough distance from the original environment to overcome its silences:

As if coming to live here has shut one narrow door and opened another into a widening concourse. In the darkness I lose a sense of space, and it is in this nowhere I feel myself

more solidly, and hear the play of voices more clearly, as if they were happening for the first time. (Gurnah, 2001: 1)

The language used in this quotation emphasises the liminality of the migrant, who occupies a “nowhere”, but it is precisely this position, which provides the narrator with a new sense of self and an energy to “hear the voices” of the past more clearly. Moreover, the spatial metaphor of a “widening concourse” suggests an opening up of possibilities for the migrant and is set against the claustrophobia of the “narrow door”, hinting possibly at the anxiety-producing journey of escape and the crossing of the threshold of the immigration services. Both characters thus confront the voices of the past, explaining to each other their respective histories through their stories.

These stories of re-translating the past relieve them of burdens. Storytelling is a cathartic experience: Latif comes to grip with his bitterness and Saleh overcomes his reclusive and threatening silence. They translate one version of the African original into another, and it is this negotiation of the translatory process that allows them to form a positive relationship. By reassessing their perceptions of each other, they create the room for personal connection that will help them to cope with their positioning as transnational migrants in England. Both characters are without families in England: Saleh’s wife and daughter are dead and Latif chose to cut all ties with his family. This complete isolation is alleviated by their storytelling as well. Among the miscellaneous items which came with the house, Saleh also found the passport of Latif’s father, Rajab Shaaban. Thinking that this document might be useful at some stage, he keeps it safe. Later, Saleh uses Rajab Shaaban’s passport to emigrate to England and thus ‘becomes’ Latif’s father by name. When Saleh asks him about this, Latif says:

You took my father’s name. Doesn’t that combination make us related? And we are in a strange land. That would more or less naturally make us related, or so people tell me when they ring to ask me for a favour. (Gurnah, 2001: 195)

This is one of the first indications that the two men might forge a nurturing relationship. Saleh muses about the importance of social connection: “I know that you never stop wishing to live, or wishing for companionship” (Gurnah, 2001: 177). After one long session of storytelling, Latif remarks playfully:

‘You grinning blackamoor,’ he said after a moment, smiling slightly. I’ll have my tea and go. But then I’ll be back. If I may. After all, *we’re related it seems.*’ (Gurnah, 2001: 194-5, emphasis added)

It is clear that storytelling changes their relationship from hatred and blame to friendship. Whereas in *Admiring Silence* stories ultimately lead to isolation for the narrator, here in *By the Sea* the text clearly suggests that their storytelling is possibly the beginning of a ‘family by choice’, which will include Rachel, the social worker assigned to Saleh. Rachel, in her capacity as “legal advisor with the refugee organisation” becomes for Saleh a cultural broker for citizenship, helping his transition/translation from an asylum seeker to someone who has gained refugee status. And, significantly, she reminds him of his ‘citizenship’ daughter Raiiya/Ruqiya:

Sometimes when I see her take her unruly hair in her hands and wring it as if in destruction, which she has the habit of doing for no obvious reason, then I think of that first meeting with her in the detention centre, and for no accountable reason I think about my daughter Raiiya, my daughter Ruqiya, whom I knew only so briefly before I lost her. (Gurnah, 2001: 203)

The hope for citizenship, once shattered in East Africa, is newly entertained in England, where Saleh and the other refugees find respite from “places where authority required full submission and grovelling fear” (Gurnah, 2001: 46). Right at the end of the novel, Rachel and Latif meet and also become friends, making this unlikely family a tentative reality. The text thus shows that friendship and belonging are not necessarily connected to ‘home’, a place which has become treacherous for both characters. It is instead in a place that is safe, but has nothing ‘homely’ about it that they “find relief” (Gurnah, 2001: 207). Significantly,

Latif and Saleh meet because of Rachel, who arranges for Latif to be called in as a translator. Instead of producing translations between Swahili and English, however, the meeting between the two men sets the storytelling in motion, thus creating 'translations' between past and present, between Zanzibar and England. Rather than using the stories to mimic the environment, they tell stories to gain a truer understanding of themselves and only by extension of their new environment. Their 'translations' happen in English (though there are traces of Arabic to create references to a shared East African past), a language which occupies an ambivalent position in the novel, being both a curse and a gift for the characters, first in Zanzibar and then in England.

Both Saleh and Latif come from a port town of Zanzibar, where cultural translation occurs daily in the interactions between merchants, sailors, travellers and the colonials. Thus, translation between languages is also an integral part of life in Zanzibar, where it is not unusual to hear conversations in a mixture of languages. Latif remembers that whenever people came to visit Hussein, the Persian trader, in the Shaaban family house they all "spoke in loud voices mixing English and Arabic and Kiswahili in polyglot good humour". Even the coffee-seller stops to admire their "foh-foh-foh, which was his way of imitating their English" (Gurnah, 2001: 88). Thus both Saleh and Latif are accustomed to cross-cultural encounters in a cosmopolitan setting. Saleh cannot speak Arabic well and Hussein is not fluent in Kiswahili, so they converse in English, making it their lingua franca to ensure effective communication. Later however, English, the language associated with Hussein, becomes fraught with betrayal and hidden treachery, particularly in his relations with the young Hassan, who is invited to daily 'English lessons' with the trader. It is in one of these lessons that Hussein seduces the young Hassan and nothing is ever quite the same in the Shaaban household after that. Saleh is also affected by Hussein's 'treacherous language', because he lets himself be smooth-talked into the business deal that causes all his misfortune, involving him in the Shaaban family drama.

The reason for the protagonists' ability to speak English in the first place is their colonial education in East Africa. English functions as the tool of oppression and coercion in the colonial administrative system, negating the worth and truthfulness of indigenous histories, as made clear by Saleh in the following passage:

In their books I read unflattering accounts of my history. I read about the diseases that tormented us, about the future that lay before us, about the world we lived in and our place in it. It was as if they remade us, and in ways that we no longer had any recourse but to accept, so complete and well-fitting was the story they told about us. [...] At school there was little or no time for those other stories, just an orderly accumulation of the real knowledge they brought to us, in books made available to us, in a language they taught us. (Gurnah, 2001: 18)

In retrospect, Saleh sees through the ironies of colonial histories, but the novel also attests to the effectiveness of English as a tool of colonial administration. The colonial stories, which so powerfully define the protagonist of *Admiring Silence*, have a slightly lesser hold on the protagonists of *By the Sea*, because the narrator observes that "gaping holes began to appear in the story. It began to fray and unravel" (Gurnah, 2001: 18). Thus already in Zanzibar, different languages are characterised by asymmetrical power relations, and this is also the case when the characters move to Europe.

Living in England as a refugee, Saleh Omar eventually appreciates his knowledge of the language that possibly offers him a peaceful old age. At first, however, when he arrives at Gatwick Airport, he pretends he is unable to speak English – "I had been told not to say anything, to pretend I could not speak English. I was not sure why, but I knew I would do as I was told because the advice had a crafty ring to it" (Gurnah, 2001: 5). This crafty silence, a refusal to translate, thus again inscribes the danger of English, possibly hindering his successful application for refugee status. Saleh's apparent lack of language also serves to protect him from too many questions: "It was early days, and I was not

ready to be questioned and documented, and perhaps to be moved somewhere else" (Gurnah, 2001: 45). This silence is an echo of the silence of the narrator of Gurnah's previous novel and thus the reader is aware of its potential threat for Saleh. As a colonial subject on the move in the former centre of power, the protagonist attempts to escape documentation through his initial silence, but the control of migrants is inscribed into the regulations surrounding visas, passport stamps and immigration procedures.

When asked for his passport, Saleh hands over his "joke document", after which the passport official notes with glee that there was "no entry visa" (Gurnah, 2001: 5). Jayawardene notes that passports and visas are "marker[s] of the ever invasive exercise of governmental powers through the identification of the One and the Other" (Jayawardene, 2006: 7). As such, passports "operate by labelling, specifying, and dislocating persons and subjectivities into demographic data to be managed and governed" (Jayawardene, 2006: 7). Saleh Omar's description of his passport (which is in any case Latif's father's passport) as a "joke" shows his awareness of being identified as an Other, to be questioned and classified as an asylum seeker. Taken aside for questioning, his refusal to speak English seems indeed a "resourceful ruse of the powerless" but at the cost of having his baggage searched and his most special possession, a box of precious incense, stolen by the immigration officer (Gurnah, 2001: 5). Latif later remarks on Saleh's silence: "Without English you are even more a stranger, a refugee, I suppose, more convincing" (Gurnah, 2001: 143).

The text draws attention to the link between language and identity and underlines how both migrants constantly negotiate, 'translate', between and within languages in order to forge a transnational identity. Bhabha's contention that migrant identity never ceases to be "transitional" and "translational" comes to mind again and sheds particular light on Latif's struggles as a long-time British resident and university professor, who enjoys success and class status through his proficiency and competence in English (Bhabha, 1994: 224). Latif's life story

also resonates with Gurnah's own position as a professor of English in the UK. English is the language in which Latif writes poetry of note and of which literature he becomes a professor. Saleh points out to Latif that his fame has travelled to Zanzibar:

We heard first of all about your scholastic achievements, and that you were a professor at the University of London. Then we heard that you had the poetic gift, which you practised under a new name. To be able to write poetry in an adopted language!
(Gurnah, 2001: 145)

Latif's perfect mastery of English, signified by his professorship, does not prevent him from feeling the hostility of this language, which positions him as an Other. One blatant incident of racism in London, where an "older man in a heavy and expensive black coat, not tall, shoulders slightly hunched" calls him a "grinning blackamoor" reminds Latif of the inherent hostility of the English towards him as an African migrant (Gurnah, 2001: 72). This racist remark seems to Latif to come from a different time "menacing and medieval" and he reinvents the man into a character of a fifties British movie (Gurnah, 2001: 72). Even as he makes light of this encounter, the term "blackamoor", together with a whole list of constructions involving the word 'black', which he looks up in his dictionary, becomes symbolic of the hatred invested in such terminology. And significantly he, as a linguist and long-time British resident, feels alienated by the language that describes his identity in such a way. This ambivalence towards English, the fact that it can provide security and success as well as hostility, is explored throughout the text. At one point Latif muses: "This is the house I live in, I thought, a language which barks and scorns at me behind every third corner" (Gurnah, 2001: 73). This alienation he feels is part of Latif's struggle to define his position in England. Added to this is a guilty recognition that people from 'nativity' might criticise him for his Englishness. As a consequence of this tight space in which he finds himself, Latif almost ignores the request to translate for Saleh:

I suppressed the dread I always felt when I was required to meet someone from nativity. Would they tell me, or think to themselves, how English I had become, how different, how out of touch? As if it was either here or there whether I had or not, as if it proved something uncomplicated about alienation, as if I was no longer myself but a self-treacherous pretence of myself, a processed stooge. (Gurnah, 2001: 73)

It is precisely this “neither here nor there” of the interstitial migrant’s experience that makes translation between the here and there possible, and necessary, in order for the migrants to make sense of themselves and of their environment. And, as already noted, the refusal to translate in *Admiring Silence* places the narrator in an impossible situation: First his lies and then his silence seriously hinder the formation of a transnational identity, tracing instead a negative trajectory clearly linked, in the book, to the story of Pocahontas’s tragic migration.

Gurnah chooses to frame the narrative in *By the Sea* with references to Herman Melville’s short story ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’ and Shahrazad’s ‘One Thousand and One Nights’. These stories are important, as they allow us to draw direct links to the issue of migrancy, translation and the centrality of storytelling. Melville’s story is about a scrivener (one who copies legal documents by hand), who slowly disengages from life by refusing to engage in meaningful action leading to his death (Melville, 1853). “I would prefer not to”, Bartleby’s sole utterance, becomes a metaphor in the text for the exile’s temptation to cut the connection to other people in a strange and hostile environment. Saleh’s silence at the beginning of the novel, as well as his refusal to get a telephone line, are signs of this isolation. Latif’s dirty and undecorated flat that reeks of “loneliness and futility, of long silent occupation” also echoes Melville’s Bartleby and signifies the precariousness of being alone in exile (Gurnah, 2001: 244). Bartleby’s “I prefer not to” is a complete refusal of any translation, its mute untranslatability leading to his death.

Both Saleh and Latif refer repeatedly to this framing story in order to try and make sense of their individual lives. Latif explains that “when I read ‘Bartleby’ for

the first time I realised that that was how I thought of my father, resigned in this futility and you his persecutor” (Gurnah, 2001: 168). By taking on Rajab Shaaban’s name and by identifying generally with Bartleby, Saleh uses Melville’s story to explain his tiredness of and disconnection from his surroundings: “I feel that I am an involuntary instrument of another’s design, a figure in a story told by someone else. Not I.” (Gurnah, 2001: 68-9). This is of course true, as Saleh is a fictional character in Gurnah’s design, but more immediately, this ‘Not I’ also exemplifies the difficulty his character has finding a deictic space in exile. Saleh uses Melville’s story to find a voice which will allow him to describe to Rachel his loneliness and his wish to be left alone:

I had mentioned the story of Bartleby to her and she had read it, and told me that she had her doubts about its greatness. Too much gloom and resignation in it, she thought, and the symbolism was oppressive [...]. Too much self-pity for her liking, all that nineteenth-century melodrama. *Perhaps she was afraid that I saw myself as a kind of Bartleby, as someone with a secret and burdensome history who sought to expatiate it with silence.* (Gurnah, 2001: 198, emphasis added)

Saleh’s identification with Bartleby indeed frightens Rachel. Yet Gurnah contrasts Melville’s story of untranslatability with Shahrazad’s storytelling in ‘One Thousand and One Nights’. Whereas Melville’s story ends in silence and death, Shahrazad’s storytelling is about survival. The complex vulnerability of Bartleby and Shahrazad is a metaphor for Saleh’s and Latif’s positions of vulnerability in exile. In referring to these two famous figures, Gurnah emphasises that the narrators’ storytelling is not just a pastime for them, but intricately linked to their survival as transnational migrants. If storytelling and translation are linked, and if Saleh’s and Latif’s stories are translations of a past produced in order to make possible a continued life in the present, then their storytelling resembles Shahrazad’s more than Bartleby’s. Like the murderous sultan in ‘One Thousand and One Nights’, Latif is the listener for Saleh’s stories that have to be told:

I knew I would tell him. I needed to be shriven. Not to be forgiven or to be cleansed of my sins, which were ones of pettiness and vanity rather than wickedness, and whose consequences had already been steep for myself and for others. Little could be done to lighten those sins, I needed to be shriven of the burden of events and stories which I have never been able to tell, and which by telling would fulfil the craving I feel to be listened to with understanding. He was my Shriver [...]. (Gurnah, 2001: 171).

The novel shows through these framing devices that it is crucial for the characters to translate their stories from Africa into this New World. In the long sessions they spend telling each other the truth about their shared past, they resist the melodrama and self-pity of Melville's *Bartleby* and try to concentrate on possibilities and human connections:

Something else inside me made me walk on a little pocket of joy, as if I had slipped the chains of my life and now roamed in another. It was the beginning of the feeling which would grow on me, that my previous life had ended and I was starting a new one, and that now that earlier life was closed off forever. I imagine it like this: that to get here I had wriggled through a passage that closed behind me. Too many *One Thousand and One Night* stories [...]. (Gurnah, 2001: 63)

"Stories can infect a system, or illuminate a world": Conclusion

Ben Okri's insight into the power of stories and storytelling in the creation of both positive and negative effects – "stories can infect a system or illuminate a world" – epitomises the argument vis-à-vis Gurnah's two novels (Okri, 1997: 120). The characters in *By the Sea*, in contrast to the narrator of *Admiring Silence*, begin to build a new life. Their storytelling is like the narrow passage of the quote above; at the other end lies the possibility of a new beginning. The narrator of *Admiring Silence*, as the title suggests, ends up more like Pocahontas (and incidentally like *Bartleby*), that is, isolated and silent. While it needs to be acknowledged that the narrator realises some limited form of resistance through mimicry, it does seriously narrow his possibilities of envisioning an alternative, more enabling present for himself. In these two novels Gurnah shows the precariousness of life

in exile and the different ways migrants can negotiate a transnational identity through storytelling. Mimicry does not create a positive space for the narrator – his liminality turns to menace. His storytelling, initially conceived as a refusal of the colonial and neocolonial stories which define the migrant, succumbs to silence:

In the end I was only trying to say NO to stories that rose and swelled heedlessly around me despite my feeble refusal. My indignation and grievance were not going to change the way the story went: in it my maladies and inadequacies would be perpetually in the foreground, my churlish cruelties would not diminish in their pettiness, and when all was said and done I would still live in civil chaos given the slightest opportunity, would starve myself through sheer lack of foresight and would forever need the master's firm guiding hand. (Gurnah, 1996: 15)

Conversely, translation is a necessary part of, to use Bhabha's words again, the "'survival' of migrant life" (Bhabha, 1994: 224). This kind of storytelling is also aware of the colonial story, but is not swallowed up and silenced by it. On the contrary, by telling 'other', truthful stories, the migrants in *By the Sea* participate in the "assault" which "fray[s] and unravel[s]" that colonial story (Gurnah, 2001: 18). This chapter has foregrounded storytelling and its function in migration. The following chapter on two novels by Moyez G. Vassanji examines the role of old and new communities in shaping individual migrant identity.

Chapter Five

Translation between the Individual and Old and New Communities in Moyez Vassanji's *No New Land* (1991) and *Amriika* (1999)

If by community one implies, as is often the case, a harmonious group, consensus, and fundamental agreement beneath the phenomena of discord or war, then I don't believe in it very much and I sense in it as much threat as promise. (Derrida in Caputo, 1997: 107)

What [Derrida] does not like about the word community is its connotations of "fusion" and "identification". After all, *communio* is a word for a military formation and a [...] cousin of the word "munitions"; to have a *communio* is to be forfeited on all sides, to build a "common" (*com*) "defense" (*munis*), as when a wall is put up around the city to keep the stranger or foreigner out. (Caputo, 1997: 108)

Threat and promise of community in Vassanji's fiction: Introduction

Moyez Vassanji's texts explore the ways in which communities constitute "as much threat as promise" in the context of migration. The immigrant community, consisting of "strangers" and "foreigners" in the respective host countries, often hope, and search, for the porous openings in the "wall" which surrounds the host community. Individuals, for example Vassanji's migrants, who are positioned on what Bauman calls the "receiving side of the new planetary mobility" are faced with a lack of freedom to affiliate themselves (Bauman, 2005: 5). This results in a twofold dilemma:

They can count neither on the forbearance of those from whom they would rather keep their distance, nor the tolerance of those to whom they would wish to be closer. For them, there are neither unguarded exits nor hospitably open entry gates. (Bauman 2005: 5)

Unwelcome in the new host society, the diaspora community erects walls as a "defense" against the insecurities and anxieties surrounding migration. This paradox of community functioning as a "threat" as well as a "promise" for the

individual migrant is the focal point of this chapter. Whether a community is open to the Other, the stranger and foreigner, has to do with its capacity for hospitality, which means “to invite and welcome the ‘stranger’ both on the personal level [...] and on the level of the state – raising socio-political questions about refugees [and] immigrants” (Caputo, 1997: 110). Hostility and hospitality within the host environment often influence the kind of affiliations to different communities open to the migrants. Vassanji’s texts paint a nuanced picture of these possible affiliations, where the individuals are moving between the old community, that views “their belonging as their non-negotiable and incontrovertible *duty*” and the new community, that “sees their belonging as similarly non-negotiable, irreversible and unredeemable *fate*” (Bauman, 2005: 5). Whereas the old community does not want to let go of the migrants, the new host community does not want to welcome them in.

No New Land and *Amriika* tell stories of journeys from Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to Canada and North America respectively. Both novels of migration explore the ambivalent processes of negotiating transcultural identity. Vassanji’s unique contribution to the conversation of this thesis is his focus on the role of community as a regulating force in the migrant’s quest for identity. The similar trajectories of migration depicted within these two novels lend themselves to this comparative analysis. The cultural translation of identity contrasts the boundary markers of the security afforded by the diaspora community (the original homeland community) and the integration into, and new affiliations with, communities in the host countries. The term ‘new affiliations’ is a deliberate choice over the more obvious one of ‘assimilation’. The latter has often been used in quite aggressively intolerant immigration policies and suggests that the migrant, the Other, must abandon his or her home culture to be absorbed by the host society. This understanding of assimilation as acculturation places the responsibility of cross-cultural understanding solely on the migrant rather than the whole social environment, which often acts in an “un-host-like fashion towards the new arrivals” (Brah, 1996: 23-25).

Key to this chapter is the suggestion that there is a subtle shift of position in relation to the boundary markers in the two novels. The earlier novel, *No New Land*, focuses more on the characters' privileging of their 'Asian East Africanness' within the secure but also, at times, restricting diaspora community, while the later novel, *Amriika*, explores possibilities of transcultural identities that are more open to new affiliations with different communities in the host country. However, Vassanji constantly reminds the reader that the exigencies of migration are complex and cause constant translation and negotiation of the multiple affiliations open to the migrants. Therefore these always remain "ambivalent affiliations", to use Malak's suggestive terminology, in relation to Vassanji's fiction (Malak, 1993: 1). The ways in which the individual migrant characters re-locate and find their own distinctive voices in relation to this scale between the boundary markers of old and new communities is largely determined by their social positions of gender, class and generation. These will be the lenses through which their negotiations of transcultural identity and their nostalgic relationship to Dar es Salaam in East Africa will be explored. Dar is not their only origin, but the one with the most recent and thus most powerful claim on the migrants' memories.

Vassanji's migrant characters are all Muslim East African Asians from Tanzania with historical roots in India and Pakistan. The novels illustrate that the geographical displacement becomes a challenge on intercultural frontiers of peoples and locales. Both Clifford and Gilroy see these interstitial spaces of cross-cultural contact as "anxiety-inducing", resulting in the "recovering" and/or "making" of new identities in the face of radically different environments in which migrants find themselves (Gilroy, 2000: 107; Clifford, 1997: 7). It is this new social space, the "contact zone" where "disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other", that destabilises perceptions of culture, community and the self (Pratt, 1992: 4). In reaction to this destabilisation, diasporic identity is constantly translated and notions of East Africanness/Canadianness or

Americanness are reconfigured within the broader boundary markers. Seeking shelter in the diaspora community of migrants, thus keeping alive the connection to the past in East Africa, exists alongside the breaking away from the past, seeking new communities. The former reaction to the contact zone emphasises continuity and involves the recovering of identity which maintains clear boundaries between 'us' (the East African Asian immigrants), and 'them' (the Canadians/the Americans) favouring stasis, whereas the latter reaction, more comfortable with the instability of change, engages in the making of a translated identity within the host culture.

Vassanji's texts distinguish between individual and communal identities, pointing to the complex relationship between personal biography and collective history of the East African Asian diaspora community. Personal identity is articulated within and against the collective experience of a group, but the minutiae of the daily life of an individual does not simply mirror group experience. By the same token, collective identity cannot be reduced to the sum of individual experiences (Brah, 1996: 124). Community therefore can be both 'threat and promise' to the individuals associated with it. Malak points out that Vassanji's characterisation establishes a link between the individual and the community in an "endeavor at contextualizing an individual's destiny within that of a family's, [and that of] an ethnic community's" (Malak, 1993: 2).

In *No New Land*, the diaspora community builds up a complex microcosm of shops, eateries, mosques and clubs, asserting their 'East Africanness' in the face of Canada's multiculturalism: "Why doesn't someone tell these Canadians we are not Pakis. Tell them we are East Africans" (Vassanji, 1991: 103-4). The ex-Dar es Salaam diaspora community also resists the strategic essentialism of the broader immigrant community. They do not want to be identified with other diaspora communities for the sake of making a political statement about the problems facing immigrant communities: "A Paki rally was not really their cup of tea – weren't they from Africa? It seemed that they were being forced into an

identity they didn't care for, by the media and public, and now by these Pakistani Asians who meant well but couldn't keep their distance" (Vassanji, 1991: 109). The novel emphasises the East African diaspora community's strong influence on individual migrants, who, particularly just after their arrival in Canada, see their "main identity as community member" (Vassanji in conversation, Cape Town, April 2005). This identity is refracted and differentiated by other identities – of gender, class and generation. It is these social configurations that provide the lenses with which to view negotiations of identity in the two texts. But before a closer analysis of the two novels, some focus on the place of departure, which functions as a constituting and defining locale for the diasporic community is helpful.

The novels are set against the background of the double origin, Tanzania and India. Vassanji reveals how the historical processes of displacement open up contact zones, where culture is performed in interstitial ways. This process supports Clifford's observation that one cannot speak of "sociocultural wholes subsequently brought into relationship [with each other] (with its overly linear trajectory)" but of approaches that explicitly articulate "local and global processes in relational, non-teleological ways" (Clifford, 1997: 7). If one looks at the city and country of departure in the novels, Dar es Salaam in independent Tanzania, one can trace such a history of encounters, of relational entanglement. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, this background of departure is similar for both authors, Vassanji and Gurnah, but their fictional responses to this 'double origin' and the political insecurities of the sixties and early seventies in Tanzania differ quite significantly – as does the reception in the host countries, North America and England respectively. Gurnah portrays isolated protagonists who struggle to establish even the most tenuous links to a community. Vassanji, on the other hand, stresses the ambivalent importance of communities in the migration experience.

The presence of Indians in East Africa is the result of the highly intricate colonial and mercantile history of the Indian Ocean world and can be briefly sketched by the following instances of crossing: indentured labour during the nineteenth century; early twentieth-century migration to Africa as the land of opportunity; the formation of colonial East Africa and the complex restructuring of colonial hierarchies after independence (Brah, 1996: 1; Lewis, 1999: 217; Malak, 1993: 2). In the 'colonial sandwich' Indians often worked closely with both the colonial administration and the trade sector. After independence from colonial rule, these hierarchies were restructured by declaring non-African citizens as "inauthentic" and followed by material dispossession and coerced departures (Joseph, 1999: 18). Ugandan Asians under Idi Amin suffered the most violent removal but the trauma of "failed citizenship" affected Asians living in Tanzania and Kenya, directly resulting in the migration of East African Asians to the West in the seventies (Joseph, 1999: 2). Already in East Africa the Muslim Asians form a liminal community characterised by voluntary and involuntary transnational movement. Joseph describes this as a complex history of "transnational longing, simultaneously invoking lost homelands like Uganda, originary moorings like India [and] new countries of domicile" (Joseph, 1999: 18). The new countries of domicile are Canada in the seventies in *No New Land* and the United States in the sixties to the nineties in *Amriika*.

The Cambridge Survey of World Migration (1995) documents that the expulsion of East African Asians in the early seventies from East Africa was resolved "through international cooperation with other Commonwealth countries" and saw them settle in the UK, Canada, India and Australia (Robinson, 1995: 331). In the this survey it is also stated that migration from Africa to the USA in the sixties was mainly in order to study: "Africans from former British Colonies who might have automatically opted for a British education found that it was sometimes easier or more desirable to enroll in a US college; and the USA, through various institutions, made this possible" (Bigman, 1995: 261). Vassanji's novels thus follow these global trends of migration.

Vassanji's novels refer to the resurgence of African nationalism after independence and the global consequences of capitalism, which to different degrees influence the decision of East African Asians to leave Dar es Salaam for "another more desirable location" (De Mel, 1995: 289). This decision is echoed in Vassanji's own biography, which follows similar trajectories of international migration. In a lecture at the University of Cape Town, Vassanji responded to the question of identity as follows: "Identity does not equal A and then B and then C. It cannot be fixed. You can be many things at the same time" (Vassanji, 2005).

The history of complex origins, as reflected in Vassanji's own life and in the migration stories he tells, points to possible reasons for the move from East Africa to the West. In the novel, *No New Land* (1991), for instance, one could argue that the newly independent state is a threat to the Asian population in Dar es Salaam, which fears that the coup in Zanzibar would repeat itself on the mainland:

As if confirming the worst fears, within a few weeks followed army mutinies in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika, quelled, embarrassingly enough, with the help of British commandos. During the short-lived mutiny in Dar, looking out, frightened, through their windows, Asians witness their shops being looted. Weeks later, in Dar, rental properties, most of them Asian, were nationalized. The "Uganda exodus" showed a way out for Dar's Asians. (Vassanji, 1991: 23-25)

There is also the sense that this rush to Canada has economic causes. Canada becomes a site of desire and longing with its "dazzle and sparkle that's seen as far as Asia and Africa in the bosoms of bourgeois homes where they dream of foreign goods and emigration" (Vassanji, 1991: 40). Technology and progress are the promises that Canada holds for the Asian population in Dar, which is assuaged by "insecurity", "fear", "competition" and "greed" (Vassanji, 1991: 64).

In *Amriika* (1999) the economic and academic reasons for migration also go hand in hand with the possible threat to personal safety. Ramji, the protagonist, looks back at his 27 years in America and muses:

And so I followed the route of so many visitors to this country. I allowed convenience, the temptation of the good life, and the assurance of safety and freedom to detain me, even as I held on to the image of the errant patriot, needed, missed in his native land. And then my grandmother died, and home had never seemed so far away. (Vassanji, 1999: 166)

Of interest here are the complexities of constructing an identity that spans the geographical and mental divide between East Africa and USA. Ramji's need to hold on to the image of the errant patriot, as well as his enthusiastic embrace of many things American, go hand in hand and the one allows for the other. Brah points out how in the diaspora space the different points of reference, in this case Americanness/East Africanness, mutually reconfigure and decentre received notions of identity (Brah, 1996: 210). It is precisely this contrast between the diaspora community, with its link to the East African past and the new communities in the host country, and all the porous possibilities between, that make Vassanji's novels such complex examples of cultural translation.

In *No New Land* the Dar diaspora community in Toronto very closely resembles the neighbourhood community of Asians in Dar es Salaam and it is this continued proximity of former neighbours that explains the tenacity with which a communal identity is proclaimed. In *Amriika* the protagonist, Ramji, moves from this sense of neighbourhood community in Dar to a position where he sees himself as part of many other communities: the student community of the late sixties, the civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam groups, the community of a religious sect, and the radical Islamist group around the *Inqalab* magazine, from which he finally distances himself at the end of the novel.

Vassanji's texts show that no matter which affiliations the characters make, they never escape the ambivalence of community as both a 'threat and a promise',

though one can detect that the narrative weight seems to favour those characters that seek to explore the possibilities outside the tightly knit diaspora community. Malak points out that Vassanji's narratives thus favour the ethos of multiplicity: "despite [the characters'] justifiable gravitation toward their ethnic shelter, the narrative discourse suggests that the human in us is too outgoing, resilient, and receptive to be boxed into a single, tribalistic identification, snug as that may be" (Malak, 1993: 6). It is perhaps for this reason, that the narrative solution of *No New Land* leaves one with a feeling of regret as the main character succumbs to this 'snug shelter' which seems more like a trap than a promise.

Migration, more traps than doors? No New Land

In *No New Land* (1991), Nurdin Lalani, a salesperson, and his wife Zera, with teenage children, Hanif and Fatima, Asian immigrants from Dar es Salaam, have come to the Toronto suburb of Don Mills to find a new life, only to discover that aspects of the past pursue them in their new environment. Hence, it is not only the strangeness of the new place with which the various characters grapple, but the fact that "we are but creatures of our origins" as Nurdin points out (Vassanji, 1991: 9). This conundrum of immigration is also suggested in Vassanji's title and epigraph, which quotes from "The City" by C.P. Cavafy: there is "*No New Land, my friend, no/ New sea; for the city will follow you, / In the same streets you'll wander endlessly...*" (Vassanji, 1991). The text asserts again and again the continuity between past and present, between the left-behind locale and the new location, upheld by the diaspora community's aim to resist assimilation into mainstream Canada:

Of course, the Shamsis of Dar had recreated their community life in Toronto: the mosques, the neighbourhoods, the clubs, and the associations. They even had Girl Guides, with the same troop leaders as in Dar. But no Boy Scouts: some things were different. That was the whole crux of the matter now. *Their Dar, however close they tried to make it to the original, was not quite the same. The sparkle was missing.* (Vassanji, 1991: 171, emphasis added)

This wish to recreate the 'original' has to do with the fact that the new cultural codes seem impenetrable as well as overpowering, so rather than assimilating Canadian ways of living that seem incomprehensible, the immigrant community keeps their home customs alive. It actively claims and recovers an East African identity, which is set against the disabling label of 'immigrants'. The quote also suggests that the process of this recreation is best described as a translatory process. The Canadian Dar, an imitation or translation of the real city, recreates the social set-up, even though it was not quite the same as the narrator suggests here. Something gets lost in translation but the text also supports the notion that something is gained. For example, the narrator re-assesses his relationship to his late father, thus managing to change fear into a more neutral position. The gain therefore lies in the possibility of looking at the past and 'home' with different eyes and from a distance. Salman Rushdie captures this ambiguity of cultural translation as the attempted reclaiming of the past in his introduction to *Imaginary Homelands*:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at a risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, *create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.* (Rushdie, 1991: 10)

The physical alienation of the migrants results in their attempt at recreating Dar in Canada, but the narrator of *No New Land* dryly comments on the fictionality of the Canadian translation of Dar es Salaam as having lost its sparkle. However, the immigrants, who translate and look back with the urge to reclaim 'home', find meaning in their 'old' communal identity. They do not wish to acknowledge that change has occurred. Thus translation - the carrying across - is influenced by nostalgia, which describes the way of looking at the origin. As in chapter one, in

the discussion of Aboulela's fiction, Svetlana Boym's typology of two kinds of nostalgia is enlightening:

The first one stresses *nostos*, emphasizing the return to that mythical place somewhere on the island of Utopia [...], where the "greater patria" has to be rebuilt. This nostalgia is reconstructive and collective. The second type puts the emphasis on *algia*, and does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home; it is "enamoured of distance". This nostalgia is ironic, fragmentary and singular. (Boym, 1998: 241; Boym, 2001: 49)

Boym's distinction sheds light on the ambivalent relationship of the individual migrant to old and new communities. The project to create a better Dar with the comforts of Canadian life is an example of collective restorative nostalgia, which seeks to re-establish that mythical place of home. It is therefore significant that the East African diaspora community lives closely together in two apartment blocks, which form an island, a safe haven from the alienation and flux represented by the Canadian surroundings. Thus the distinct "topography of No. 69 Rosecliffe Park Drive" functions as counterpoint to an unsettling present through its focus on the past (De Mel, 1995: 174). Hence, this kind of nostalgia corresponds with the identity formation, which seeks continuity within the known community. The strategic invocation of East Africa, the focus on the *nostos*, supplies the diaspora community with an identity, holding anxiety at bay. It is important to note though that this community is not quite the same, because the socio-political environment in Canada, with its aggressive capitalism, erodes some of the values which were in place in Dar. This means that the 'promise' of shelter and support is not always maintained as will be evident in the discussion on class and material status. On the contrary, the 'threat' is present in the harsh social evaluations by the diaspora community, which reduce an individual's worth to their material success, something which was less pronounced in Dar, simply because there were less material resources available: "the carpeting, the sofas, the telephone, the fridge, the television – yes, luxuries by Dar standards – things you could not have owned in a lifetime" (Vassanji, 1991: 59).

Thus, the Canadian surroundings influence the characters and unwillingly, unwittingly, their lives change, sometimes coming closer to the fragmented vision of home, of the second type of nostalgia that Boym describes as reflective. This reflective kind of nostalgia is concerned with the “irrevocability of the past and human finitude, it suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis” (Boym, 2001: 49). What distinguishes Vassanji’s use of nostalgia from Aboulela’s is the insistence that mobility and change are more important for the individual migrant than being rooted in a particular religious and cultural tradition. While Aboulela’s texts qualify Boym’s distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia, Vassanji shares Boym’s suspicion of the politics of restorative nostalgia, which build on collectivity rather than individual autonomy.

The recognition of change, sometimes resulting in disconnection from the diaspora community, depends on the social positioning of the characters. This positioning, as indicated earlier, rests on categories like gender, class and generation against the backdrop of their racial difference in Canada. These categories often determine whether the characters gravitate towards the ‘old’, familiar ways of the Dar diaspora community (even if not quite the same) or whether they seek affiliations with the ‘new land’. Malak insists that in any case the establishment of roots is difficult:

It is not that the immigrant or the exile does not desire affiliation, but often he or she wishes it on convenient terms; and even then the sociopsychic situation is such that he or she cannot fully, firmly belong. Neither does such an equivocation represent arrogance or cowardice, but rather a forced phenomenon of human reality. (Malak, 1993: 6)

This equivocation cuts across all social boundary markers, as evidenced in the following discussion. Beginning with gender, one has to note that Vassanji’s novel mainly uses older female characters to maintain the connection to the past and to keep the diaspora community intact. The text’s representation of three women, Roshan, Zera and Sushila, in relation to the diaspora community and the past in East Africa, is particularly interesting. Nurdin’s sister-in-law, Roshan, who

arrived in Canada before them with her husband, Abdul, eagerly embraces Canada's materialism, expressed by her mantra "this is Canada" (Vassanji, 1991: 35). Her hopes for a better life are encapsulated by these often-repeated words but the text shows the limitations of such a naïve expectation. Roshan's suffering under the violent attacks of her husband does not get resolved, because in times of crisis she falls back on codes of behaviour carried across from East Africa. In Roshan's case of abuse, Nurdin exhorts her to "call the police [...] This is Canada" but the women decide to keep quiet "hush-hush, don't wash your dirty linen in public" (Vassanji, 1991: 137). This recurs repeatedly in the text, where individuals want to embrace the new possibilities that Canada offers, but somehow they cannot escape the fold of the diasporic community. It is also interesting to note that in this instance the role of the community is not just one of protection but of 'threat'; it condones suffering for the sake of cultural tradition.

The text positions the female characters as the repository of tradition and also exposes how this can operate against their interests. In her discussion of African male writers' construction of women in their texts, Stratton points out that the women characters are often identified "with the heritage of African values" (Stratton, 1994: 46). Similarly, Mama asserts that women are seen as "the bearers and upholders of traditions and customs, as reservoirs of culture" (Mama, 1997: 54). Zera, Nurdin's wife, is one character who functions in the narrative as an upholder of tradition, but Vassanji makes it clear to the reader that he is critiquing this positioning.

Zera is a female character who "did not like change" and who works tirelessly to get Missionary, their religious and social leader back home, to emigrate as well (Vassanji, 1991: 6). She becomes an active agent in the narrative closure of the novel with this insistence on the past, as Missionary's arrival produces two important results: Nurdin stays with his family, resisting the temptation of an extra-marital affair and Nanji, a young linguistics lecturer and family friend, gets married to Missionary's daughter, Khati. The novel thus foregrounds the point

that the connection to the past is one solution to the turmoils of migrancy, which entrap rather than free the characters. This is also evident in the case of Roshan's abuse, where the past is seen as a trap, preventing a change of her situation. De Mel remarks that the narrative resolution of Nurdin's commitment to the diaspora community depends on "a particular stasis" and "fetishizing the past" and thus elides the attempts by characters to break away and challenge certain aspects of this communal identity (De Mel, 1995: 175). However, in his interpretation of the novel, De Mel overlooks the crucial narrative intervention, which shows regret at Nurdin's inability to embrace new possibilities, particularly in his relationship with Sushila. At the end of the novel, Nurdin realises that "some sort of commitment had been wrought from him" and that "the tryst he had almost agreed to – and the *freedom* it would have led him to – now seemed remote and unreal" (Vassanji, 1991: 207-208, emphasis added). The choice of words in this quotation, of "freedom" that now seems "unreal", indicates Vassanji's critique of Nurdin's entrapment behind the 'wall' and regulating influence of the diaspora community. The narrative suggests that while the hostile environment in Canada may offer more possibilities "for the feisty (like the showy lawyer Jamal)", modest characters, and particularly Nurdin, are "not so self-assured, and they have to find shelter, comfort, and inspiration from within the collectivity" of the Dar diaspora community (Malak, 1993: 6). Nurdin's insecurity influences the way he translates himself into the Canadian environment. The narrative in its endorsement of Sushila's independence stresses that this weakness is what prevents Nurdin from accessing new spaces in the host country.

Sushila, a cobbler's daughter from Dar, widowed, living on her own above Kensington market, challenges the traditional gender roles and the forceful role of the diaspora community. Sushila is represented as a character with determination, who clearly breaks with tradition and class by refusing to go back and help her family after her husband's death and by studying for a high school diploma in middle age, because she had been denied this opportunity as a child

(Vassanji, 1991: 157). She also challenges Nurdin, because she is single and self-sufficient and talks more freely. When she proposes they spend an afternoon together Nurdin realises the possible freedom this offer presents:

What to do? Let his life slip by, this golden opportunity escape – for what? He was a mere servant, slaving away for his children, whose lives now all lay before them, full of possibilities – did they need him any more? And Zera was wedded to God, it seemed. *Sushila promised release. But wasn't it this freedom that was so attractive, that made possible a new world – his own freedom?* (Vassanji, 1991: 175, emphasis added)

Sushila is thus the only older woman in the novel who looks forward to a new reality, without the nostalgic backward glances so characteristic of the other women. But, in the narrative resolution her free voice is silenced and excluded. As the temptress she has no place in the diaspora community and the last time she appears in the narrative, she is portrayed as standing at the window of her flat looking out, silent and rejected. The narrator draws the attention of the reader to Nurdin's rejection of her in his acceptance of the past, again foregrounding that the possibilities of his individual identity – this tentative freedom – are subordinate to the collective identity:

It seemed to Nurdin that, with the dust settled [...] Missionary had exorcised the past, yet how firmly he had *also entrenched it in their hearts*. That afternoon of opportunity [...] had receded into the distance, into another and unknowable world. (Vassanji, 1991: 207-8)

Missionary, the community leader from Dar, who agrees to emigrate to Canada to establish a link to the past and Nurdin's personal experiences that distance him from the diaspora community are erased – they become an unknowable world. Thus Vassanji's text critiques the way in which the diaspora community controls its members and at the same time ensures that there is no space for the 'foreigner' like Sushila. The text thus constantly foregrounds the double side of community, as both shelter and trap.

Like gender, class determines the kind of cultural translations individual migrants are able to make. The text initially positions the diaspora community as a social safety net, where the more successful members carry those who have less. This spirit of sharing breaks down more and more in the novel under the strain of combative capitalism and its assimilatory pressures, resulting in an awareness of class differences. Modest material expectations, a residue of Dar standards, are censored: “Wah,” said Nurdin, lounging on the sofa. “This is enough for me. This is all I ask for.” “Wait,” said his sister-in-law, “you’ll want more. And you’ll get it. This is Canada.” (Vassanji, 1991: 36-37). Soon enough, the expectations of others start to come down on Nurdin:

And mosque, how could you go by bus to mosque: where all comparisons begin and end, where your real worth is measured. When did you arrive? You tell them. What work do you do? And you’re crushed, what to tell them. All the while newcomers, younger people find jobs, success stories proliferate, bus and subway drivers in uniforms – men you thought no better than you – haughtily stare you down, prouder than doctors and accountants with cute kids and expensive wives. (Vassanji, 1991: 89)

The community that could offer support and nurturing turns out to be more interested in success stories, even if they come at the expense of a sense of belonging. In this regard, the ‘old’ ways of the communal exchange of wealth disintegrates and the diaspora Dar community succumb to new affiliations with Canadian materialism. In his article on exile, Said discusses this phenomenon, where individual success overrides the wellbeing of the community: “Exile is a jealous state. What you achieve is precisely what you have no wish to share” (Said, 1994a: 141). Nurdin’s fruitless search for a job reminds the reader of the constant attrition of unemployment, which is exacerbated by the lack of support from the diaspora community:

Dejection and defeat written all over his face’, he looked like a shrunken version of himself, red eyed, weary, his clothes crumpled, the day’s growth of beard bristly on his face. (Vassanji, 1991: 7)

'A shrunken version' is a bad translation. The confidence and simplicity of selling shoes in East Africa is not carried across to Canada. Nurdin's search for a job also takes a toll on his body, thus the hostility of the host country is inscribed in the lines of his face: "He felt tired these days, old. His hair had greyed and thinned, there were lines on his face, and his skin somehow looked more opaque in the mirror" (Vassanji, 1991: 85).

In her study of unemployment among British South Asian immigrants, Brah points to the manifestations of acute financial problems, like "boredom, depression, anxiety and anger" (Brah, 1996: 55). The struggle for class status is exacerbated by the generational conflict. The young people do not seem to understand the difficulties of their elders and Nurdin has to face his children's unsympathetic questions about his inability to find a job:

Gone were the days of fullness of heart, the sense of wholeness at having children. Time was when it was children that brought a man rushing home. *But this country had taken his children away*, and he felt distanced, rejected by them. (Vassanji, 1991: 166, emphasis added)

The self-fashioned future is mainly about material success, particularly important to the young, and Fatima unequivocally tells everyone who asks her that she wants to "'become rich.' To many of the girls and boys of Sixty-nine and Sixty-seven and the other high-rise apartment buildings in this part of Don Mills, this is what growing up meant – making it" (Vassanji, 1991: 4-5). Issues of class are therefore closely associated with generation. Materialism becomes the substitute for a close knit community where people can rely on each other's help and Nurdin realises that Fatima would "rise to where they had neither the courage nor the ability to reach" (Vassanji, 1991: 167). The younger generation tries to insert itself in the host society by establishing new affiliations, but here too Vassanji points to the possibilities as well as cautioning against an overly assimilationist stance. This ambivalence is evident in the ironic descriptions of shopping

expeditions, where the mall becomes the “kaaba” for the immigrants, thus pointing to the loss of spirituality in face of materialism (Vassanji, 1991: 40).

To build up a business, or to own a house, the work of generations in Dar, is now a matter of a few years. The location fosters high expectations that weigh on the immigrants; hence Nurdin speaks about the “reckoning with a future” that he has to create for his children. It is therefore not surprising that the main problem of this future in the diaspora is an exacerbated generation conflict that splits the community.

Like class, generation is a social category, which refracts and partially determines the negotiations of diasporic identities for the characters of the novel. Whereas the older generation suffers, the children thrive in their new environment:

It is part of recent folklore at Sixty-Nine that in Canada even the children of pygmies grow up to be six-footers. And good-looking too. As if to bear this out, Fatima towered over her parents, and in the elevator only one man was as tall as she. (Vassanji, 1991: 4)

Physically as well as socially, the younger East African Asians are more at home in Canada. Nanji, a young lecturer at the University of Toronto, expresses the dilemma of the younger people who are inevitably becoming westernised “which is what we’ve opted for by coming here” (Vassanji, 1991: 77). They consciously seek out new affiliations, breaking away from the constraints of their diaspora community, resulting in a painful rift between generations. The young who can translate themselves easily into the new context look down on the perceived clumsiness, and the ill-fitting, ill-at-ease Otherness of their elders:

There must be something in the Canadian air that changes us, the old people say. The old people who are shunted between sons and daughters and old people’s homes – *who would have thought that possible only a few years ago*. It is all in the air: the divorces, crimes you could never have imagined before, children despising their parents. (Vassanji, 1991: 136, emphasis added)

The disbelief and puzzlement of the older people at behaviour that would not have been possible in Dar also shows how the environment changes the community and even though the nostalgic longing to create a second Dar is upheld by the older generation, the children lack such nostalgia. They are impatient to translate themselves into Canadians, foregrounding and proclaiming this identity over others. But this also takes a toll on the social fabric of the community, as the quotation above exemplifies. Assimilation becomes more inevitable, the longer the migrants stay. The children are the reason for emigrating in the first place, for whose sake the parents leave their homes and community. Still in Dar, Nurdin muses about the power of English and how students that had gone to England for a while came back a class apart: "Ten years hence would your children forgive you when they saw their friends return as wealthy tourists waving dollars and speaking snappy English?" (Vassanji, 1991: 26).

Implicated in the lenses of class and generation are issues of language proficiency. The ability to speak without an accent is shown as a determining factor of the kind of affiliations open to the characters. The connection between the mastery of English and wealth is explored constantly and the rift between those with strong accents and the children who speak perfect Canadian English yet again emphasises this: "One envies these children, these darlings of their mothers, objects of immigrant sacrifice and labour, who speak better-sounding if not better English" (Vassanji, 1991: 64).

Zera and Nurdin's daughter, Fatima, is particularly disdainful of their past and tries very hard to emulate everything Canadian: "Fatima, who went to school and spoke English with an accent neither of her parents could even move their mouths to imitate, now had a mind of her own" (Vassanji, 1991: 67). It is also she who insists that they go and watch fireworks by the lake – a Canadian activity:

act like Canadians, for chrissakes! All this playing cards and chatting and discussing silly topics while glugging tea by the gallon and eating samosas – is not Canadian. Not realizing that most Canadians she knew and met were like her, with parents not too different from hers. (Vassanji, 1991: 129)

Fatima's rejection of her parent's adherence to their own culture has to do with the pressure of assimilation, the attempt not to stand out as being different from other Canadians. The naïve wish to fit in is undercut by the text's episodes of blatant racism encountered in the host country, which foreground racial identity over and above other identities. The text thus describes instances where the Canadian community 'defends' itself against the 'stranger', in this case the immigrant, and thus becomes extremely inhospitable. The Othering that the immigrants experience negates their efforts of being recognised as fellow citizens. Malak points out that

Vassanji's characters – whether in Africa, in Europe, or in North America – are hounded and haunted by racism, real or perceived; it hinders their progress and cripples their emotional/ intellectual growth, leading them to give survival an exceptional priority in their lives. (1993: 6)

Racism compounds ambivalent affiliations, because it can cause the "regress into the communal cocoon" as a strategy of survival and thus prevents the characters from accessing other communities (Malak, 1993: 6). Wanting to be recognised as fellow Canadians goes hand in hand with the assertion "tell them we are East Africans" (Vassanji, 1991: 104). The diaspora space is thus one that is characterised by negotiations of movement and Vassanji shows that the migrant's wish to be admitted to the host society is constantly undercut by rejection. To create a home from home means the interrelation of East Africanness with Canadianness, an ongoing process, constantly in flux. When discussing the regret at having left Dar, the characters have to confront their changed reality in Canada:

That intangible that lights up the atmosphere – the spirit, perhaps – was missing, as everyone, even Roshan This-is-Canada acknowledged. All this said was that they, themselves, waiting for their master, Missionary, to come and reinforce their faiths, were also not quite the same. (Vassanji, 1991: 171)

The character who best shows this complex precariousness of shifting identities and willingness to change is the lawyer, Jamal, who came to Canada empty-handed but has now got his own law firm. His success is only possible through the curtailing of ties with the immigrant community. He becomes “their *former* friend, they had to remind themselves, now that he’d moved up in the world” (Vassanji, 1991: 9). Very aware of the instability of his status, he actively widens this gap and this makes him an unlikeable character:

There was a proper distance between a lawyer and a client. Professional conduct demanded it. He maintained this distance by putting between himself and them a secretary, a saucy ‘Canadian,’ who recognised no relationship bar that of lawyer and client. (Vassanji, 1991: 160)

In his personal life, he consolidates this distance by marrying a Canadian woman:

The residents of Sixty-nine – those who had been invited – had never forgiven Jamal his wedding reception, where they had been thrown together with people they could not relate to, all the accommodation – including the speech and jokes – being made for those others (the “Canadians”) and not for them. It made them feel inferior. (Vassanji, 1991: 159)

Nanji who is always very perceptive and thus comes closest to expressing Vassanji’s opinions, knows that this acculturation is a risky process and he muses: “If there is anyone worth watching, any life worth following, it’s surely his. Even in his conformity, his *assumed respectability*, he is taking a risk, walking a dangerous path.” (Vassanji, 1991: 162, emphasis added). Assumed respectability is the key here to understanding how the text positions Jamal as a mimic, like the narrator of Gurnah’s novel *Admiring Silence* discussed in the

previous chapter. Jamal is assuming, putting on an identity for the sake of conformity and he does it well. There is the costume: expensive suits; setting: plush home and intimidating law firm; prop: Mercedes; wife: Nancy, who can be called Nasim. The risk that he runs is rejection by the community he has chosen. The efforts he pours into this new affiliation, this cutting ties with the past, might not be enough, for as the title of the novel intimates, there is “no new land” and “in the same streets you’ll wander endlessly” (Vassanji, 1991). Moreover, the text also suggests that the characters might always be subjected to the hostility and racism of the host society.

Unlike Jamal, the text indicates that Nurdin re-establishes his link to the diaspora community, but also acknowledges that he has changed in Canada. With the help of Missionary, he is able to exorcise the fear of his late autocratic father: “in one stroke that photograph had lost all potency, its accusing eyes were now blank, its expression dumb. *Suddenly they were here, in the modern world, laughing at the past*” (Vassanji, 1991: 197, my emphasis). It is his own community who helps him to greater psychological freedom, but there is also the sense that it could have only happened in Canada, ‘the modern world’. Canadian ‘air’, this agent of change, thus helps Nurdin in his journey to a small measure of personal freedom along with the acknowledgement of a past, devoid of mystery:

Before, the past tried to fix you from a distance, and you looked away; but Missionary had brought it across the chasm, vivid, devoid of mystery. Now it was all over you. And with this past before you, all around you, you take on the future more evenly matched.

(Vassanji, 1991: 207)

Nurdin, as well as the other migrants, is negotiating his own multiple positions vis-à-vis this strange new country which affords these strangers both vast possibilities, and innumerable restrictions in the creation of a transnational identity. This negotiation happens between the two poles of either proclaiming an East African diaspora identity, full of nostalgic longing for the left-behind place, foregrounding the needs of the diaspora community or engaging with the making

of a new identity, stressing movement rather than stasis, seeking new affiliations with other real or “imagined communities” (Brah, 1996: 93). In *No New Land* the migrants, on the whole, tend to orient themselves towards what is familiar, but Vassanji shows how it is impossible to resist change completely. In his later novel, *Amriika*, he focuses more on this change, often resulting in reflective nostalgia, where the position of detachment is desirable rather than lamentable. This journey towards change is compared in the novel to travel into outer space, thus again establishing the promise and the threat inherent in any individual's attempt at cultural translation.

Migration as a journey into other galaxies: Amriika

In *Amriika* (1999) Vassanji imagines a protagonist who distances himself from the East African diaspora community in the United States to engage with real or “imagined communities” in the host society – Brah uses this term from Benedict Anderson to explain political affiliation which does not necessarily result in a face-to-face meeting of members of such communities. This is unlike the close-knit diaspora community where everybody knows about everybody else's problems and concerns. Rather than emphasising the continuity of a past in Africa, and a present in the West, this novel traces the rupture and disconnection caused by transnational movement for an individual. Like *No New Land*, *Amriika* is a story that begins with the departure from home but, as the difference in the titles hints, is more concerned with the destination than the location of departure. However, this narrative still maintains the tension of ambivalent affiliations, which will be evident in the following analysis.

The title of the novel, ‘Amriika’, is the way Ramji's grandmother pronounces ‘America’. The text translates ‘America’ into a word heavy with foreign accent as well as denoting a different cultural meaning. Thus the title already hints at the possibility that whatever community Ramji chooses, it is always one that is mediated by cultural translation. With this name, the grandmother creates a set

of associations for her nephew that will always be a combination of the memory of her and her spirituality and of invoking the image of a mythical place of fulfilment, a destination that holds exciting new possibilities:

Our ancestors were Hindus who were converted to a sect of Islam. In Grandma's words, the sun would arise that day from the west. How far was this west? My people sought it first in Africa, an ocean away, where they settled [...]. But in time this west moved further, and became – America; or, as Grandma said it: Amriika. (Vassanji, 1999: 3)

The religious imagery created here of the “sun rising from the west” brings together the notion of paradise as well as apocalyptic changes due to the complete shift of the natural order inherent in the movement of the sun. This captures precisely the view of migration that this novel seeks to establish. Whereas in *No New Land* most of the characters, though never entirely, stick to their own community in order not to fail, here Vassanji uses the metaphor of space, the universe, to point out the terrifying aspects of migration and at the same time the exhilarating potentialities of the discovery of a completely unknown world. On his first night in the U.S., Ramji compares himself to the lunar astronauts, who “even while making the giant leap for mankind, were at least in constant touch with planet earth, to which they would eventually return” (Vassanji, 1999: 13). Ramji feels that his move from Dar is more daring than their space travel, because he cannot be sure of his return. The use of language here strikes an interesting balance of threat and possible discovery. Despite the violence of the culture shock, the comparison to the landing on the moon suggests new possibilities; he is entering a ‘new life’:

Sirens hooting in the night, so demonically urgent, so persistent, sending chills up his spine where he lay wide-eyed in his bed, grappling with *a world that had just cracked open*. (Vassanji, 1999: 7)

Apart from his friend Sona, he is on his own within a campus community of American and international students, caught up in the Vietnam crisis in the late

60's. Interestingly, in comparison with the immigrants in *No New Land*, the foreign students are invested with relative status and thus do not experience the direct hostility that the immigrants to Canada experience, who are immediately inserted in a racialised insider/outsider discourse. This has to do with the fact that foreign students are expected to go 'home' once their studies are completed and thus pose no threat to the host country but also comes back to Vassanji's opinion that the forming of a new identity is easier for young people, as was evident in the discussion of *No New Land*. There is also an obvious class difference between the foreign student and the unemployed immigrants. Ramji, starting an undergraduate degree, without Nurdin's burden to having to provide for a family, focuses on the possibilities his new abode has to offer. His curiosity about America was already sparked at home in East Africa, both through his grandmother's prophetic pronouncements and through the visible effects of globalisation in Dar.

American culture and politics are part of everyday life in Dar es Salaam and this effect of globalisation already causes acculturation at home. Like Gurnah in the previous chapter, Vassanji purports that 'home' is not a static place but a space of cultural translation, where different languages and cultures intersect. For example, in Dar Ramji follows the news on radio: the landing on the moon, Elvis, foodparcels to Berlin, the Cuba crisis and the Kennedys. However, these news items are questioned, albeit naïvely, by local opinions: "The fundis – tailors – outside Grandma's house were all of the opinion that the Americans had the world fooled: 'Éti, how can anyone go to the moon'" (Vassanji, 1999: 9). This kind of discussion of American culture in the home environment does not prepare Ramji for the culture shock that awaits him on arrival, but it makes him aware of other ways to look at the world.

Initially, at the Morrises, his American host family for the summer vacation, he spends most of his time in front of the TV, which becomes the main source of information. Comparing notes with his friend Sona he writes:

They have shown me all those things you mention, and more – I have seen the gadgets and the gizmos (how I love that word!). And I am *immersed* in television. Gomer Pyle has me in stitches, and I *love* Lucy and Dick Van Dyke, and Jeannie and McHale – and I could sing you the Gilligan theme song ... and much more. I know about baseball now, but this is not the football season, you should know that! But no hippies here. (Vassanji, 1991: 24)

Taking in enthusiastically as much of the new world as he possibly can while with the Morrises, Ramji, now getting ready for university, realises that he “had crossed a threshold” and that he was ready to “start his new life” (Vassanji, 1999: 26). Within a month after arrival he feels much more comfortable and settled in the new environment of mainstream USA. The university campus proves to be another, quite different challenge, as Ramji is confronted by “gurus, pirs, psychologists, zealots of every stripe” who are all trying to get disciples (Vassanji, 1999: 29). Coming from a community in Dar, where the communal identity is more important than the individual experiences within it, Ramji is insecure as to how to affiliate himself:

It was a marketplace of ideas they were in, a veritable souk, this city of colleges, Cambridge, Mass., founded by another persecuted people three hundred years before. It was a home for heresies, where the intellect found a place to be and become, find its rhythm from a multitude of beats, sample from dozens of tastes. Flyers everywhere – on public walls, on lampposts, on notice boards, or handed out enthusiastically in the corridors, on sidewalks, at building entrances – shrieked out their messages like hawkers peddling their wares. (Vassanji, 1999: 29)

Ramji is overwhelmed and challenged to find a space for himself in this cacophony of voices and opinions. To call the campus a “souk” (“marketplace” in Arabic) reminds the reader again that Ramji is constantly engaged in cultural translation. The character’s perception of the environment is mediated by his East African past, and Vassanji, by using Swahili and Arabic in his text, asserts this cultural background. The above quotation also points out the positive effect of University as a place where the intellect could be and become. Ramji is not

just challenged by the University as such but he cannot settle comfortably into focusing on his studies, because his roommate, Shawn Hennessy, works in the anti-Vietnam-war movement, and engages Ramji in lively political discussions. In his bewilderment, he finds solace in the Friday mosque ritual over which Sona presides and which is a continuation of 'home':

So every Friday in a dense, carpeted area of the library he produced from his royal blue airline bag a white sheet, a bottle of holy water, a port glass, a small bowl, incense sticks, and matches, and conjured up a mosque for his congregation. (Vassanji, 1999: 28)

The words "conjured up a mosque" suggest that the migrants' hold on what is familiar is diminished in the new environment. The Friday mosque as a mirage, a semblance is similarly described as the recreation of Dar in Rosecliffe Park in *No New Land*, both having lost part of their signifying power in the West. It is for this reason that Ramji soon stops attending. Home, particularly his grandmother, seems so far removed, despite the ritual and Ramji is afraid of the changes effected by his new environment. After a lecture, he sees himself in a "more accurate, and scary" light: To his grandmother at home, "who could have no idea as to what exactly was happening to him" he must be just an image, a memory (Vassanji, 1999: 39). This echoes Said's contention that much of the effort of the migrant is poured into re-establishing a link to the real, because "the exile's new world is unnatural and in its unreality resembles fiction" (Said, 1994a: 144). It is for this reason Ramji seeks new affiliations, tangible, real communities that can function as substitutes for what was left behind. This novel, in contrast to *No New Land*, allows its migrant protagonists much more freedom of movement and choice. However, Vassanji's protagonist never completely belongs either, because as it turns out, the new affiliations remain double sided as promise and threat.

Ramji turns to politics: "there *is* a different way to view the world from the one [he was] used to" (Vassanji, 1999: 66). This is a crucial point in his immersion in a different culture; suddenly there are many possible choices and alternative ways

of looking at the world and himself. Ramji discovers this fairly quickly and feels liberated by it. Looking back at this time, the older Ramji qualifies the promise of freedom offered by 'Amriika' and reflects:

Whenever – and it has been often – I think of my first years here, in this land, it seems I had walked through a portal – a passageway – to emerge into a state of enchantment. There was no walking back of course, no undoing of that spell. There was now a certain looseness of step, an exhilaration, a sense of freedom. I had an awareness of a larger universe than the one I had known and of all manner of possibilities, of *choice*: in one's beliefs and actions. I wouldn't say there was any less anxiety in this freeing myself of the faith and moral order of my ancestors, of the sense of guilt and sin which keeps one bound to their universe. There was terrible fear – of hell and damnation – awesome anxiety and loneliness, which only appear diminished now from this distance of years and seen through the intervening medium of nonbelief. (Vassanji, 1999: 162)

The use of the two voices of narration, Ramji's young and naïve self and his older, more experienced self, serves two purposes: it allows a longer time frame, thus detailing changes that have developed over decades and it allows two generations in one person. This longer view of accumulated knowledge of the older narrative voice also serves to show that new affiliations have to constantly be re-negotiated as well. Vassanji thus reconciles the generation conflict of the earlier novel *No New Land*. Ramji is full of Fatima's impatience to integrate, but he is also aware that this youthful acceptance of everything new comes at a cost of feeling disconnected. While the text emphasises that the disconnection from the diaspora community holds immense promise (of entering a new universe), the longer view of the older narrative voice reveals that any community can pose a threat. The promise of border-crossing offered by 'Amriika' inevitably has to make way for the reality of life in 'America', with new borders and walls that need to be negotiated.

Estrangement as a way of crossing borders, of entering new territory, places Ramji's experiences firmly into Boym's second type of nostalgia referred to earlier as emphasising "algia"; it is "enamoured of distance. Its nostos could exist

in the plural as geographical, political, and aesthetic homes” (Boym, 1998: 241). It is not only the distance to Dar es Salaam, but Ramji develops a position in which everything - politics and faith - has to withstand the test of being surveyed from a distance. When he joins a cult, after having abandoned the Friday mosque, it is this distance that preserves a degree of detachment and results in his eventual rejection of that particular religious community.

Vassanji emphasises that new ways of seeing and thinking are among the most positive gains of migration. These new ways of seeing however, bring with them an understanding that the communities of ‘the new land’ at times pose more threat than promise. In his essay on exile, Said points out that the experience of displacement fosters an awareness of the double-sidedness of communal and territorial boundaries: “in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons” (Said, 1994a: 147). In comparing Ramji’s personal growth with Nurdin’s, it becomes clear that the latter chooses familiar territory which ultimately also imprisons him within the constraints of diaspora community. There was a sense of regret in the narrative about Nurdin’s turning away from some of the opportunities that Canada presents and the authorial weight seems to lie with Ramji’s position of engagement with the host country. Vassanji points out that a complete break with the past is not possible or even desirable for Ramji either:

Ramji had never been able to be unequivocal; his inner life had always been steeped in ambiguity and doubt. He had never belonged to any place entirely, not stood behind a cause or movement without reservations; when he left a judgmental, jealous God for the cold thrill of reason, he still could not do without portents and symbols, always yearned for moral certainty. (Vassanji, 1999: 399)

Ramji's friend, Sona, however, reacts differently to the distance from home. He is completely immersed in his studies of the historical origins of the Shamsi¹ branch of Islam that most Dar Asians belong to, and cannot quite follow Ramji's contemporary politics. Initially, confronting Sona's lack of commitment to the political issues of the day, Ramji compares him to a tribe of shopkeepers "ducking issues while going on with their trade" and causing "trouble in East Africa" with that attitude of evasion (Vassanji, 1999: 84). Sona retorts: "'Look you're proselytizing! You've picked up the Christian ethic, you want to change the world – you've become an American!'" (Vassanji, 1999: 84) What is most interesting in this exchange is the fact that Ramji admits that he has changed: "There was no going back to one's previous state of being. *The more one stayed here the more altered one became*" (Vassanji, 1999: 87, emphasis added).

Two decades later, Ramji thinks of Sona's scholarly work in quite a different way: "And yet all the while Sona had been as political as anybody could be" (Vassanji, 1999: 205). What the text makes clear is that Sona's studies are not just a simple continuation of life in Dar but in their own way demonstrate a detachment from ideas of religious purity. Sona thus becomes Vassanji's mouthpiece as he expresses an important concern of the author. Sona's cause is the preservation of the history and beliefs of the Shamsi people and their syncretistic belief system, combining Islam and Hinduism. This has come under threat by "Arabism and Islamic imperialism" and the text is very critical of exclusive communities (Vassanji, 1999: 205). Sona's commitment to the history of this small community has not waned since their student days, because in a way it is a model of an open and porous community in the sense that it has accommodated a mixing of belief systems from different origins. Vassanji thus invents the Shamsis and their syncretic beliefs in order to show in sharp relief the intermingling of cultures that questions any simple constructions of origin and that excludes any attempt at cultural or religious purism. For, what Ramji comes to treasure most, above any

¹ According to Malak the "Shamsis are Vassanji's fictional representation of the Isma' ilis, a subset of Shi'ism, one of the two great branches of Islam" (Malak, 1993: 7).

claim for identification with a community, is the sense of individual freedom and of personal choice which he did not have as a young student, when both he and Sona believed that they would go back to Tanzania:

The odd thing was that part of one's new consciousness was to become more devoted to the country one came from, and to appreciate more its problems. There was no doubt in their minds that they would return as soon as possible to their young nation and participate in its development. (Vassanji, 1999: 88)

This underlying assumption of return, in order to participate in nation building, is fostered by the host's expectation of the temporary nature of the foreign student. At home, in Dar es Salaam, it is Ramji's grandmother who reminds him of his obligation to come back and help her and possibly also the wider community:

Back home – how haunting is that term *home* – back home times were hard. Now that I had a place of my own, I thought of inviting my grandmother to come and visit. Instead she asked me to come back, and get married. (Vassanji, 1999: 165)

This causes "annual guilt-ridden resolutions to go back to Africa, to do my bit for nation-building" but Ramji never returns (Vassanji, 1999: 164). Interestingly, he marries a woman from the East African diaspora community in the States but quite tellingly this relationship ends in divorce, distancing Ramji further from a sense of communal identity.

Ramji identifies strongly with the political climate of the sixties in America and therefore he participates in a big anti-war rally in Washington DC. Looking at all the young American protesters around him, Ramji is acutely aware that his identity as an activist is far removed from his former self and Vassanji again uses metaphors of outer space to illustrate this:

I am a guy, a simpleton, from the town of Dar es Salaam in the African country of Tanzania, belonging to a small Indian community called the Shamsis. Its so far away this city by the blue-green Indian Ocean, it could be in another galaxy; it could belong to another life, a past incarnation.... (Vassanji, 1999: 108-109)

Being touched by the “magical sixties” with its “mark of righteousness and of belonging on the right side always” is something that permanently impresses on Ramji the wish to be engaged in politics and this is the main cause of his accepting Darcy’s invitation to work for the Inqalab magazine. The aim of this Islamic magazine is to “make inroads into mainstream culture” and to “subvert the homogenizing melting-pot” (Vassanji, 1999: 276). This quote indicates that the host culture is clearly seen as pressurising immigrants to assimilate, thus becoming this homogenising force, a threat. In order to resist this force, Ramji is instructed to write in a “polemical” way. It is this zealous polemicism, with its own particular brand of fundamentalism, that makes Ramji eventually uncomfortable working with them.

Critical detachment and the freedom of individual choice have become Ramji’s main credo acquired in America (Vassanji, 1999: 295). This gain of living in the contact zone is tested by an ironic turn in his private life: He falls in love with Rumina, the daughter of the Zanzibari Sheikh Abdala, who forced young East African Asian women into marrying Africans for the sake of assimilating the Asian population after independence in Zanzibar. When Ramji discovers this, he is so shocked that he breaks up the relationship but regrets this immediately. Rumina, a *persona non grata* in the eyes of the Asian diaspora community, challenges the truthfulness of Ramji’s assertion that he has broken ties with his community. Ramji rises to the challenge and while working at Inqalab they get back together. The possibility of their relationship shows how their new location has changed them and how little hold the past values have over them – they have become different people:

‘Twenty-five years ago, ‘ he said. ‘I thought I had got it out of me, the sea.... Reminds me of home, a bit, but home’s on the other side of the ocean, straight ahead of us.’ ‘Only it’s not home any longer.’ ‘And we’re not who we were.’ (Vassanji, 1999: 282)

This quotation indicates that there will always be a lingering memory of Dar es Salaam and the historical consequences of this origin that makes the negotiation between Americanness/East Africanness an ongoing process. But the nostalgia has changed to a reflective relationship with the origin of departure. Reflective nostalgia values its detachment, because 'home' has shifted. East Africa is not home any longer. Vassanji attests to the fact that they have created a home for themselves in this foreign country and as a consequence have changed. However, despite the inevitable and often liberating change that occurs for the migrants, the text is careful not to resolve the tension between community's potential to offer shelter as well as pose a threat.

Ramji is living happily with Rumina and working at the Inqualab magazine, when a young man from the ex-Dar community asks for shelter. Torn in his affiliations Ramji considers his connection to the community:

An appeal from a compatriot, a Community member; we were brought up to believe we were all brothers and sisters, we stand by each other. We come from the same neighbourhood, went to the same school and the same mosque [...]. You could end up loosing your faith but you would never really abandon a brother. Give him a place to stay in an hour of need? Surely this was the right thing to do. (Vassanji, 1999: 330)

It turns out that this young man, Michael, uses Ramji and Rumina's flat as a hiding place, because he is the suspect in a couple of politically motivated bombings. As Ramji gets more and more frightened the narrative reaches a climax, when the police surround the flat and Michael commits suicide in front of Rumina. At this point Ramji's home is shattered. Rumina disappears after this traumatic episode and Ramji is repeatedly interrogated until the police have ascertained whether he has been involved in 'terrorism'.

Ramji finds his home dismantled at this intersection of the claims of a past community and his present life. Reluctant to completely sever the links that bind him to Michael, Ramji again experiences the tragic consequences of offering

hospitality to a 'brother' who turns out to be affiliated to an exclusive and extreme community that has nothing to do with Ramji's new affiliations.

Neither traps nor galaxies: Conclusion

While the word [community] sounds like something warm and comforting, the very notion is built around a defense that a "we" throws up against the "other", that is, it is built around an idea of *inhospitality*, an idea of *hostility* to the *hostis* [stranger], not around hospitality. In hospitality I must welcome the other while retaining mastery of the house; just so, the community must retain its identity while making the stranger at home. (Caputo, 1997: 113)

It is clear that both novels, *No New Land* and *Amriika*, engage with the complex multiplicities of constructions of transnational migrant identities. Most of the protagonists in *No New Land* struggle for individual autonomy in the face of pressures from their Dar community. On the whole, they maintain a restorative nostalgic position towards Dar es Salaam and are thus caught within a paradigm, which situates the individual firmly in a community. In contrast, the main protagonists of *Amriika* have a reflective nostalgic relationship towards Dar and the East African diaspora community. They cherish their individual autonomy, the distance and detachment, gained through migration and the possibilities of new affiliations to other communities within the host country. Both novels, despite these differences, insist on the equivocal affiliations of migrancy, so neither metaphor – trap or travel into other galaxies – captures this adequately. Rather, Vassanji charts a development across the two narratives towards more individual freedom for the migrant. This means that migration inherently suspends the migrant in a simultaneous translation movement between the traps and a wealth of opportunities.

In a conversation with me in Cape Town, Vassanji stressed that the character Ramji is based on his own experience of leaving East Africa in order to study abroad: "there is the feeling of guilt but the crossing of boundaries has to

happen” (Vassanji in conversation, Cape Town, April 2005). This crossing of boundaries reveals the promise but also the threat inherent in a community, because the migrant looks at the community with detachment. Said maintains that this detachment enables the “practice of noting the discrepancies between various concepts and ideas [of community] and what they actually produce” (Said, 1994a: 147). Vassanji’s novels, *No New Land* and *Amriika*, for all their differences, both portray the complexity of the ambivalent affiliations open to the migrants and thus they contribute to the thesis an important insight into the multiple influences of community – both as promise and as threat. Vassanji’s fiction points towards porous communities, where boundaries can be crossed rather than upheld by an exaggerated group solidarity which exists alongside the hostility towards outsiders. Vassanji critiques the influence and control of communities in upholding dogmas and orthodoxies which pose a threat to others and, more importantly, to the individual autonomy of the migrant.

Chapter Six

Conversations Across: *Conclusion*

The exile [...] exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental at one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on the other. (Said, 1994b: 36)

Translation passes through *continua* of transformation, not abstract ideas of identity and similarity. (Benjamin, 1986: 325)

The previous chapters have foregrounded four particular strategies of cultural translation vis-à-vis two texts by each of the writers as a way to organise the material: nostalgia and faith in Aboulela; knowledge production in Mahjoub; storytelling in Gurnah and the relationship between the individual and old and new communities in Vassanji. This chapter will be more dialogical, where all four writers' texts will be brought into conversation across these four strategies. What emerges from this discussion across the chapter boundaries is captured by Benjamin quoted above: cultural translation requires of the migrant multiple negotiations that cannot be adequately described by abstract ideas of identity. Translation, by definition, entails a constant movement back and forth between source and target language and culture. The textual evidence indicates that cultural translation rests on ongoing complex processes of transformation determined by idiosyncratic factors like individual personality as well as social categories like nationality, race, class and gender. It is with this complexity of what Said terms the "median state" in mind that I weave the threads of the conversation together.

The Weather, Nostalgia and Islam

To end with the English weather is to invoke, at once, the most changeable and immanent signs of national difference. It encourages memories of the 'deep' nation

crafted in chalk and limestone; the quilted downs; the moors menaced by the wind; the quiet cathedral towns; that corner of a foreign field that is forever England. The English weather also revives memories of its deemonic double: the heat and dust of India; the *dark emptiness of Africa*; the tropical chaos that was deemed despotic and ungovernable and therefore worthy of the civilizing mission. These imaginative geographies that spanned countries and empires are changing, those imagined communities that played on the unisonant boundaries of the nation are singing with different voices. (Bhabha, 1994: 169, emphasis added)

Bhabha poignantly draws attention to an aspect of cultural translation which is visible in all four writers: the English/North American/Scandinavian weather becomes a metaphor for the change in real and imagined geographies. The English climate and its representations in English literature carries, as Bhabha indicates, much ideological weight. Portrayed as most fertile, benevolent landscape, conducive to human cultivation, it has shaped the imaginations of its people but also of the people it colonised. In the description of the plane ride from Dar to England Vassanji's narrator contrasts the desert of Egypt with the "flat, grey and brown wintry fields, neat roads, the orderly rows and squares of staid brick or stone houses" of England (Vassanji, 1991: 33). In the same passage this identification with England becomes even more pronounced: London was not a foreign place, not really, it was a city they all knew in their hearts" (Vassanji, 1991: 33). Even though this passage speaks about the city, the reader infers the emotional energy which is required to anchor the colonised in a relationship with an imagined geography so alien to their home environments. For this reason, it is significant that the four authors relentlessly dismantle the trope of the mild English climate.

The migrants in the chapter on Aboulela remember the weather in Africa, its colours and warmth, as a source of affirmation, whereas the weather in Northern Europe and North America becomes its cold deemonic double. This reversal is important in more than one way. It signifies the shift in imagined communities. From the metropolitan centre, migrant voices do not reiterate "deep" national boundaries but privilege a memory of an altogether different climate and

landscape. These nostalgic memories of African landscape and climate manifest themselves in the Western environment, thus shaping diasporic geographies through which the migrants view their sense of belonging in the Western city. I have shown this in relation to the particular use of nostalgia in Aboulela's fiction but it is pervasive in Mahjoub, Vassanji and Gurnah as well.

The weather is a prominent signifier especially when migrants have just arrived and are particularly vulnerable. In most of the novels discussed in this thesis, the migrants arrive at the onset of winter: "I arrived in November, three months before February, and it was already unbearably cold with months of deepening winter still ahead of us" (Gurnah, 2001: 44). The writers agree on the significance of weather as a literal obstacle but also use it as a metaphor for the difficulty to arrive and settle in the new environment. By focusing on the weather, Said, in his memoir *Out of Place*, registers an ongoing defamiliarisation:

I experience the changing seasons from fall to winter with dread, as something unfamiliar, having come from a basically warm and dry climate. I have never gotten over my feelings of revulsion for snow, [...]. For me snow signified a kind of death [...]. (Said in Zeleza, 2005: 3)

The image of snow as a kind of death suggests more than a nostalgic yearning for warmth. It is an image of annihilation, where the individual is pitted against a natural geography that is as hostile as some of its social formations. Said's memoir expresses his continuous struggle to adapt to such a climate. I argue that descriptions of the weather frequently occur in texts on migration to highlight in the most immediate sense that the migrants are out of place. The polarisation between the cold and hostile weather in the North and the warm and affirming climate in Africa is resolved in the narratives whenever the migrants find ways to translate themselves into the new environments. Even in this mundane battle with the climate, cultural translation assumes importance and wider significance for the migrants. A warm coat, a friendly hand, a fluffy towel and an unexpected glimpse of the sun can become a translation moment, transforming, undoing

some of the cold and by extension, facilitating the movement back and forth between the separate locations.

Vassanji's *Amriika* is an exception, the only novel of the eight texts discussed in this thesis in which the migrant arrives in the North American summer. The narrator mentions the unusually hot August weather, suggesting perhaps that an arrival as a foreign student with a scholarship is less traumatic and difficult than the other migration scenarios. This also links to the idea of knowledge production. The student, who will have easy access to new knowledges, both academically and socially, is in an enviable position. Vassanji, as pointed out in chapter five, sees this as an ideal kind of migration. His central metaphor in *Amriika* of space travel, indicates that he sees migration as an avenue of traversing new terrain of different knowledges. But not all his migrants are this fortunate.

In Vassanji's earlier novel *No New Land* the drastic change in climate from Dar es Salaam to Canada marks the Lalani family's arrival in Toronto. It evokes the indifferent hostility of the new environment (after all, one cannot blame the weather):

Snow had fallen, a blistering wind blew squalls on the road and, as they stepped outside the airport building, it made sails of their ill-fitting secondhand clothes, which had seen better days on the backs of colonial bwanas and memsahibs on chilly African evenings. Toes freezing, faces partly paralyzed, eyes tearing, they stood outside, shoulders hunched. (Vassanji, 1991: 35)

Significantly, the hunched shoulders, both a defence against the wind and an indication of the burden that migration places on the Lalani family, is an image that manifests itself again in the descriptions of Nurdin's fruitless search for employment. Vassanji thus uses the weather as the initial marker to chart the changing geography of the Western city where the migrants carve out their small niche. In these spaces, the weather, far from being an immanent sign of national

belonging, signifies the changing trajectories of movement. Stories of empires are told differently: when the migrants arrive in the west, their imagined geographies change. The English weather, which might have had its appeal in Africa, loses its signifying power. Instead, the migrants redirect their attention to the climate of their country of departure with renewed emotional attachment. Even the clothes of white colonials travel back to the empire, but this time worn by the formerly colonised, by immigrants and asylum seekers who change the metropolitan landscape. The references to the weather thus offer pithy coded ways to chart cultural difference.

In Gurnah's text, *By the Sea*, there are similar descriptions of the weather just after the migrant's arrival in England. These descriptions 'from below' function as enduring images of a geography of alienation. Saleh experiences the English weather as physically painful:

The wind howled and wailed outside, gusting at times as if it would lift the whole building and hurl it away. I felt as if the blood in my veins had stopped flowing, had turned into sharp-edged crystals which bit into my inner flesh. When I stopped moving my limbs went numb. (Gurnah, 2001: 43)

The wind tearing at the detention centre for asylum seekers trying to hurl it away, becomes a metaphor for British immigration policies, which seek to keep immigrants out. Citing the example of asylum seekers in Britain, Shukri comments:

In a fortress continent where failed asylum seekers are snatched without warning, locked in detention centres and forcibly deported to appease an increasingly conservative electorate, failure is the desired outcome of applications for asylum. (Shukri, 2006: 26)

In Gurnah's fiction the weather is a sign of national boundaries, traversed by migrants and thus re-written. Passages such as the above make it clear though, that such traversal and translation are perilous processes, likely to involve pain

and hardship for the migrant. Gurnah contrasts the covert violence of the immigration apparatus in England with the overt state violence during the revolution on Zanzibar and the difference is what makes Saleh decide that the former is a lesser evil than the life threatening violence of the latter. This decision precipitates the process of making do, of adapting to the climate both literally and socially. As the migrants settle, get adequate clothing and become used to the weather, their immigration status becomes less tenuous.

In Aboulela's *The Translator* Sammar shields herself against the cold with a beautiful red woollen coat, which becomes a translation object, as Cooper points out:

The coat may be new, but it translates from the past [...]. It is the colour of *henna* used in body decoration; it is in the same spirit of celebration of *Eid* that she remembers from childhood. It is sensuous, pleasing and integrates the different communities and cultures that Sammar brokers. (Cooper, 2006)

The coat therefore normalises the climate, which can be negotiated more successfully underneath the warm wool. The novels show that as the migrants negotiate and transform, they develop strategies to deal with a cold climate. The weather thus connotes both the strangeness and hostility as well as the possibilities of translation such a new terrain might bring.

To the reader this is particularly evident in Mahjoub's novel *The Carrier*, which follows the protagonists' quest for scientific knowledge. The new mental terrains that Rashid al-Kenzy traverses are mirrored in the alien landscape of Scandinavia. The climate of Jutland, Denmark, where Rashid ends up after his shipwreck, becomes a metaphor for the dangerous space Rashid has entered in terms of knowledge production. His pursuit of knowledge results in his being swept away "north to the ends of the earth" (Mahjoub, 1998: 21). This description signifies how far Rashid has moved away from the centre of power, where knowledge is sanctioned by the status quo. Incidentally this centre is located in

North Africa (England and central Europe hardly feature in this geography). From the ends of the earth, from the North, his perspective changes radically. If it is possible for a person to migrate to a place on the earth that is so very different from the place of departure, then the step to imagine a different geography of the universe with the sun at its centre is perhaps less daring than for a person who has remained in the same spot always.

Already in the harbour of Cadiz, after his first leg of the journey, Rashid registers how he has “stepped into another world”, where in the “grey, overcast light he had the sense of pagan, heathen spirits unleashed” (Mahjoub, 1998: 73). Rashid’s battle with the weather thus signifies a much deeper battle of his losing his faith in the face of scientific discovery. The violent storm that blows their ship off course is itself a powerful device to alert the reader that some journeys (in more sense than one) cannot be controlled. So the reader discovers that after leaving Cadiz, “the learning which they carry with them is of little use for they have willingly, though unwittingly, entered their own Sea of ignorance” (Mahjoub, 1998: 98). The further they get, the less they have a hold on the geography. Stars that would lead the way cannot be seen so far north and the “English fog chokes them in passing” (Mahjoub, 1998: 103).

In Jutland, Heinesen takes Rashid to his farm ‘Helioborg’, which means ‘Castle of the Sun’. This is a misnomer in the eyes of Rashid, who battles with the biting cold, the constant rain and darkness as the sun hardly rises the closer to winter they get:

Rashid’s ability to think was now severely reduced. He stuffed straw into his trousers and jacket to keep himself a little warmer. All his efforts were expended on the basic matter of finding comfort for his body, of staying alive in this *inhospitable climate*. (Mahjoub 1998: 169, emphasis added)

It is at this point the nostalgic longing for the heat and sun of Africa starts and Rashid’s “curved shoulders ache with longing for the touch of the sun” (Mahjoub,

1998: 170). A common reaction to such a challenging climate is the recourse to nostalgia. The migrant expresses nostalgia in the yearning for sunlight and warmth. This is the extent to which Mahjoub and Gurnah allow their characters reflective nostalgic recollection, to use Boym's terminology. Moving away from the weather, both Aboulela and Vassanji address nostalgia more generally in their fiction.

Nostalgia is the movement backwards in cultural translation, where the migrant, rather than engaging with the target culture, privileges memories of the source culture. In contrast to Aboulela's sustained and strategic usage of restorative nostalgia in her works, Vassanji's text, *Amriika*, mixes nostalgia for the country of departure with nostalgia for a youth that has passed. Ramji's nostalgia includes the early years of his migration experience and it is thus not so much a looking back to the source culture alone but a nostalgic remembering of the target culture. In re-telling his memories of the sixties, Ramji foregrounds his migration experience centred on personal and political liberation. Because of its nostalgic narcissism the reader scrutinises these memories with suspicion. Nostalgia, a love affair with the past to negotiate a difficult present, foregrounds glorious memories, which do not necessarily reflect the reality of the personal history of the character. It does reflect one thing though: whether the migrant wholeheartedly embraces the new country of domicile or retains a sense of distance to it – belonging is largely a construct of the mind. Nostalgia retrospectively presents us with an organic image of people who belong. The slippage between then and now however, shows the futility of such remembering. Cultural translation, in its movement back and forth, is thus a more fruitful process. It is perhaps for this reason that nostalgic moments are more rare in Vassanji's earlier text, and seldom appear in Gurnah's and Mahjoub's fiction.

Vassanji's *No New Land* depicts very few moments of nostalgia, which is censored the minute a character dares to utter a yearning for the past. The

community of immigrants are adverse to nostalgia, because they want to be recognised as Canadians:

In Toronto's Dar immigrant gatherings it was considered positively uncouth to recall with any seriousness that previous life. Not quite realizing this, he [Nurdin] had on one or two occasions attempted to point out a minute detail, *something precious* that brought out a nuance of a life once lived, only to be scorned by the grinning mouth of his sister-in-law, This-is-Canada Roshan. (Vassanji, 1991: 170, emphasis added)

Roshan's attitude points to the threat of nostalgia forever fixing the migrant as a pillar of salt – backward looking. What Roshan (subconsciously) realises is that the host country is much more generous towards migrants who quickly assimilate, who stop looking out of place. Thus, nostalgia is perceived as a hindrance to cultural translation, as it fosters an attitude of looking back, of not carving out a present, because of a hankering after the past. It is important to remember that Aboulela's characters have positive memories of home, whereas Vassanji's, Gurnah's and Mahjoub's migrants leave under duress and in some cases after enduring terrible suffering 'at home'. Under these traumatic circumstances, departure becomes a way towards healing and freedom. The complicated relationship of these migrants with their place of departure largely excludes nostalgic longing. One of Gurnah's characters explains nostalgia's tendency to distort reality: "It's only lying nostalgia'. If I were writing it now, I would also tell the horrible stories and depress everyone" (Gurnah, 2001: 132).

Nostalgia as a form of lying, of reinventing a past to one's liking, is not a route Gurnah allows his characters in *By the Sea*. This is different from his earlier and more cynical *Admiring Silence*. Gurnah's migrant lies to create a past in order to manufacture a particular image of himself in the present and this does not serve the character well. Realising that the romanticising tendency of nostalgia has its limits, Aboulela insists that her migrant's alienation in the host country can be countered by stronger spiritual certainties – Islam as a transnational religion becomes her focus.

This turning to religion in face of alienation features both in Gurnah's and Vassanji's work as well, but in a more sporadic manner. Unlike Aboulela, the male writers chart their characters' uncertainties and religious doubts, which in Vassanji's fiction leads to a secularisation of his characters:

I wouldn't say there was any less anxiety in this freeing myself of the faith and moral order of my ancestors, of the sense of guilt and sin which keeps one bound to their universe. There was terrible fear – of hell and damnation – awesome anxiety and loneliness, which only appear diminished now from this distance of years and seen through the intervening medium of nonbelief. (Vassanji, 1999: 162)

While Aboulela remains firmly within an Islamic world view, the other authors show that religion offers support to some migrants but not to others. In Gurnah's *By the Sea*, prayer and faith surface in those instances where the characters are powerless and subjected to violence and abjection. This is particularly the case during Saleh's time in prison:

[...] we prayed: every day, five times a day, as God commanded. He had caught up with all of us, the worst and the best. We prayed at the precise times specified by tradition, not a little later or the next day or not at all, as was often the case in the pointless frivolity of our ordinary lives. The prayers filled out the days, as did recitations of the Koran from memory. They brought order and purpose to our chores, and a stoicism that would otherwise have been inconceivable. (Gurnah, 2001: 232)

Close to annihilation, subjected to extreme hardship, the prisoners seek comfort in faith. The five prayers at specific times structure and give meaning to the day in the face of the injustice of imprisonment. Gurnah's text suggests that faith relates directly to the emotional and physical security of some of his characters. Instead of Aboulela's faith as part of every day life, Gurnah's text shows that faith resurfaces in correlation to levels of distress. This is echoed later in the narrative, when Saleh finds himself in England in a situation of acute worry and isolation. The performance of a ritual offers a sense of security amidst neglect:

Later in the afternoon I began to feel ailing and delirious and decided that the time had come to say Ya Latif, O Gentle, O Gracious. We had performed the prayer together when we were in prison, at times of illness and anxiety, and it is best done that way, as a congregation and on behalf of the one who is ailing and distressed. But there was no one there to perform it for me, and I hoped I would not offend the form by saying it for myself. (Gurnah, 2006: 59)

The repetition of a cultural ritual with the added dimension of the assurance that a higher being will be listening, provides the migrant with tangible comfort. For Gurnah's protagonist this simple ritual functions as a translation moment: in the absence of a prayer mat and the community of believers, the migrant transforms and adapts the ritual to the British environment. The prayer changes and is changed by the requirements of the foreign place. For the reader this passage requires translation as well: the detailed description and the lengthy Arabic prayer with its glossing in the text has to be filled with foreign cultural information.

In Vassanji's *Amriika* religion provides the initial grounding for Ramji, the young student from Dar es Salaam, who is awarded a scholarship to study in the States. He joins the "lonely souls" who gather for the Friday mosque in the University library (Vassanji, 1999: 28). This mosque is very different to the one in Dar, exemplifying again how culture travels and the intricate connections between routes and roots:

so every Friday in a dense carpeted area of the library he [Sona] produced from his royal blue airline bag a white sheet, a bottle of holy water, a port glass, a small bowl, incense sticks, and matches, and conjured up a mosque for his congregation. (Vassanji, 1999: 28)

The blue airline bag, which contains the other cultural specific ingredients for the religious ceremony, is a translation object. It signifies the journey and the transformation such a journey entails for the ritual. At the same time, it is transformed into a part of this ritual, linking both in inseparable ways. These

small moments of cultural translation within quotidian activities enable the migrants to deal with their anxieties and alienation. The less threatened Ramji becomes, the less frequently he turns to religious affirmation. Vassanji thus charts the process of secularisation in the Western environment. Religion in his fiction thus only provides a limited function for the migrants.

Mahjoub's character, Rashid, in *The Carrier*, experiences his faith as a source of stability. For this reason, the new knowledge about heliocentricity becomes personally threatening:

Terror at the fear of losing the one thing which has sustained him through all the years of his life – his religious faith. He no longer prays. It is a fear that is directly linked to the awe he feels when contemplating the sheer mathematical beauty of that intricate scheme which can describe so many motions at once. (Mahjoub, 1998: 242)

Mahjoub's short phrase "he no longer prays" shows that Rashid's new discoveries displace a faith, which defines such knowledge as heresy. As noted, Mahjoub is the author who most directly critiques religion when it is harnessed by state power in its particular ability to suppress knowledge and knowledge production. It is therefore significant that Rashid's travels, which take him further and further away from organised religion, also enable him to gain new knowledges.

New Knowledges

In the introduction to this thesis I pointed out the opportunity that migration offers in terms of knowledge production. The fact that the migrants are aware of more than one culture, more than one geography and more than one home empowers them with, to use Said's words again, an "originality of vision" (Said, 1994a: 148). This vision, as the novels indicate, can shed light on the complex intersections and intricate interconnections between Africa and the North. For example, Mahjoub's *The Carrier* is a passionate narrative to alert the reader to such

interconnections which have always existed, despite and amidst the polarisations between the continents in the past and present. Aboulela, Vassanji and Gurnah would agree with Mahjoub that the transmission of disparate knowledges happens when people occupy contact zones.

Aboulela's character, Sammar, in *The Translator*, learns more about Islam in Scotland, where she translates *hadiths* and thus is encouraged to interpret the Arabic to render it correctly into English. This activity fosters new knowledge: "I am learning a lot, things I didn't know before" (Aboulela, 1999: 96). In the narrative, Aboulela points out explicitly that this is knowledge which was kept from her protagonist at home because it might threaten the religious regime:

'One *hadith* that says, "The best *jihad* is when a person speaks the truth before a tyrant ruler." It is not often quoted and we never did it at school. I would have remembered it.' 'With the kind of dictatorships with which most Muslim countries are ruled,' he said, 'it is unlikely that such a *hadith* would make it's way into the school curriculum.' (Aboulela, 1999: 1996)

Jihad, which is frequently translated as 'holy war', has in the Arabic more than one meaning. In its most neutral form it means 'concerted effort' (Basil Hatim, conference presentation at the 2nd IATIS proceedings, June 2005, UWC). As a religious concept, it signifies the effort of individuals to live a life pleasing to Allah and to create a society that reflects this. Only in Scotland, while translating, can Sammar reclaim a term misused by religious authorities and vilified in the Western media as a useful and positive concept: "Here in Scotland she was learning more about her own religion, the world was one cohesive place" (Aboulela, 1999: 96). Aboulela's text makes the point that learning traverses cultural and religious boundaries in unexpected ways. Translation in its literal sense, as well as cultural translation, is a way to generate and access new knowledge.

Vassanji's novel *Amriika* particularly foregrounds this connection between migration and knowledge production. It follows the format of a *Bildungsroman* where the young protagonist is inundated with many different knowledges and has to choose a good path for himself. When Ramji arrives at Cambridge, Mass. he is overwhelmed by the possibilities his studies offer. The novel emphasises repeatedly the intellectual opportunities and social challenges the new environment has to offer. In retrospect the reader discovers that Ramji learned much in the host country in the sixties: "He had come to view the sixties as *his period of rebirth*, from ignorance and narrow-mindedness into enlightenment and an awareness of the world" (Vassanji, 2001: 203, emphasis added). The narrative undercuts this positivistic view towards the end of the plot, when Ramji is interrogated for his possible involvement in terrorist activities (the reader knows that he is innocent). All his knowledge gained over the years did not protect him from the claims of a desperate fellow East African, whom he hides in his flat. This turns out to have been a grave mistake.

The two novels which most unequivocally equate migration with positive life-altering knowledge production, *The Carrier* and *Amriika*, never resolve the final ambiguity of such translation processes. Both protagonists, Rashid al-Kenzy and Ramji, are suspended in limbo at the end of these novels. The reader is left to imagine either a happy or tragic ending for them. Gurnah pushes this perspective on knowledge production and migration further. Knowledge is both empowering and disempowering, a means of being safe and of landing in danger, in Gurnah's texts.

We see this ambiguity at work in *By the Sea*, where descriptions of Zanzibar port point to the dangerous and beneficial intersections of knowledges due to the many trade routes that converge there:

For centuries, intrepid traders and sailors, most of them barbarous and poor no doubt, made the annual journey to that stretch of coast on the eastern side of the continent, which had cusped so long ago to receive the musim winds. They brought with them their

goods and their God and their way of looking at the world, their stories and their songs and prayers, and just a glimpse to the learning which was the jewel of their endeavours. And they brought their hungers and greeds [...]. (Gurnah, 2001: 15)

This passage stresses that encounters between the locals and travellers potentially entailed a positive exchange of knowledge as well as clashes and conflict. Added to centuries of trade interactions between East Africa and Arabia, the Gulf and India, comes the colonial experience first with the Portuguese, the Omanis and then with the English. The clashes and intersections of (often harmful) knowledges and ways of looking at the world this history entails, directly influences the school education young Saleh receives:

Years before, the British authorities had been good enough to pick me out of the ruck of native schoolboys eager for more of their kind of education, though I don't think we all knew what it was we were eager for. It was learning, something we revered and were instructed to revere by the teaching of the Prophet, but there was glamour in this kind of learning, something to do with being alive to the modern world. (Gurnah, 2001: 17)

The teachings of Mohammed on the importance of learning intersect with the power and allure of British colonial education. The systems of power, in this case religious and administrative, reinforce each other in such a way that makes a critique of them impossible. Only in retrospect can Saleh muster the ironic distance to criticise his naive enthusiasm for his school days.

In the same novel, Latif's migration story is one of finding ways to escape his family tragedy. The pursuit of knowledge offers him the escape route he needs. At age seventeen Latif is sent to East Germany to study. This escape comes as a result of Tanzania's post-independence turn to socialism and its subsequent alliances with the Soviet Union and East Germany. The students, who apply for this scholarship, are not allowed to ask for a particular subject and Latif is awarded a study place in dentistry (Gurnah, 2001: 107). In the cold autumn in Neustadt, Latif struggles to adjust to the noisy and violent conditions in the hostel

he shares with students from all over Africa. His lessons offer respite and warmth:

I enjoyed the classes, I loved the classes. I woke up in the morning with a thrill of pleasure and anticipation, and then remembered why. I had classes. Our classrooms were in a smaller building next door, and they were very well equipped: practice booths, comfortable desks, well-heated. (Gurnah, 2001: 114)

The discomfort and anxiety of recent arrival is eased considerably by the classes. Again, like in Vassanji's texts, studying abroad is portrayed as a comparatively easier way of migrating. The transmission of knowledge provides intellectual and physical comfort, not least because it places the student within a community of learners. Vassanji's student protagonist, Ramji, realises that this question of communal alliance remains pertinent and he muses: "Can I talk about myself without reference to a group?" (Vassanji, 1999: 257). This is a crucial question at the heart of the migration experience, asking whether community matters. Vassanji focuses in his writing on the considerable influence community has over individuals. This influence anchors the migrant in a recognisable group, often consisting of the homeland immigrant community. But apart from this initial sense of security, Vassanji's texts both insist that the individual has to find his or her own position vis-à-vis the host country, otherwise the contact zones are reduced to a minimum and points of knowledge production are curtailed.

Community Matters

Nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in communal habitation. How, then, does one surmount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride, collective sentiments, group passions? (Said, 1994a: 140)

The four writers indirectly answer Said's pertinent question in different ways. Said claims that a completely detached position is virtually impossible and that the

migrant always, in one way or another, attempts to “reassemble broken history into a new whole” (Said, 1994a: 141). Aboulela’s response is perhaps the clearest in this regard. She locates the migrants’ community in the transnational community of believers. Communal habitation happens in and around the mosque where people of all nationalities can share in the celebration of Islam. Rituals demarcate and punctuate daily living and are often performed in community. The evening prayer at University in ‘The Ostrich’ is a good example of such communal ritual:

Sandals discarded, we line up and the boy from the canteen joins us, his torn clothes stained with tea. Another lecturer, not finding room on the grass, spreads his handkerchief on the grass. If I was not praying I would stand with my feet crunching the gravel stones and watch the straight lines, the men in front, the colourful *tobes* behind. I would know that I was part of this harmony that I needed no permission to belong. (Aboulela, 2001: 48)

Communal expression of faith creates belonging. It is therefore not surprising that Aboulela stresses this as the antidote to the disorientation of migration. The above quotation differentiates the community along gender lines: the men are separate from the women while performing the ritual. This separation recurs again and again in Aboulela’s texts where the immediate community around her women protagonists are other women. For example, in *The Translator* the narrator describes how the women of the local mosque in Aberdeen help Sammar in the first days after Tariq’s death:

People helped her, took over. Strangers, women whom she kept calling by the wrong names, filled the flat, cooked for her and each other, watched the everwandering child, so she could cry. They prayed, recited the Qur’an, spent the night on the couch and on the floor. They did not leave her alone, abandoned. [...] the presence of these women kept her sane, held her up. (Aboulela, 1999: 8)

Her perception of this cross-cultural community is unequivocally positive, even if not without conflict. In her novel *The Translator* readers are aware that Rae and

Sammar's marriage is an image of Aboulela's ideal community. It is also clear that this union will not be without problems. It will always require cultural translation, but as Aboulela sees it, the foundation in Islam will ensure the cohesiveness of her protagonists' relationship.

Much has been said about religion as the problematic glue of communities and it is perhaps for this reason that the other authors refrain from characterising the ideal community in this way. In fact, the textual evidence indicates that the authors are wary of community, precisely because, as Said's statement points out, community so often rests on the exclusive binaries of 'us' and 'them'. For the migrant this binary has become, by necessity, porous and to resurrect boundaries for the sake of community has to be cautiously and critically evaluated. But Said puts his finger on the sore point, expressed by Ramji in Vassanji's *Amriika*: can one see oneself as detached from all community? Mahjoub's texts indicate that communities rarely nurture and care for the individual. Even communities of learning are not exempt from prejudice but they come closest to the ideal of providing a nurturing and safe space. Both protagonists of the novel *The Carrier* experience groups of people as threatening unless they can engage in scholarly exchange.

Rashid al-Kenzy is introduced to the reader on the run from the mob in Algiers, who out of superstition believe him responsible for the death of a merchant he knew. The description of this is telling in its indictment of the crowd:

They caught him, of course, and they beat him soundly. Then they dragged him by the heels through the squares and the alleys, back through the jeering crowd where the common people spat upon his dusty, soiled form. With his arms held up to his face for protection, he bore the brunt of their hatred. (Mahjoub, 1998: 3)

When examined by the qadi of Algiers, the guards explain that the community accuses Rashid of sorcery – the same people Rashid helped and advised in their worries and illnesses, who were grateful for his knowledge, have turned against

him. The narrative suggests that the community's anger is directed at Rashid, because he is a stranger, who arrived in Algiers from elsewhere. Later in the novel, the description of the Jutlanders' reaction to Rashid is identical in its cruelty and hatred. This echo points to the problem of the concept of community, which rests on the premise that individuals either identify and belong to the community or they do not and thus have to be kept out by force. In Rashid's case, the community in Algiers allowed him a brief time to participate and identify, only to use him as a scapegoat when the death occurs. It is his foreignness that makes him vulnerable. Mahjoub criticises communities which defend themselves against Others, because the foreigner and stranger is treated inhospitably and with suspicion.

The twentieth century plotline around Hassan reinforces this critique. In the local shop a farmer watches gleefully as Hassan registers the headline of the newspaper, which talks about a rejected asylum seeker. Even Okking, the archaeologist, treats him with caution and covert disapproval. The most direct indication that the rural community fortifies itself against the outsider is when Hassan finds his accommodation soiled and a sinister stuffed monkey pinned to the front door. He explains to Martin that this action is based on ignorance and fear – the opposite of knowledge – which “grows in them, getting tighter and stronger each passing year. Until one day its all they have and they know nothing else” (Mahjoub, 1998: 223). In contrast to the ignorance of the village community, Mahjoub's vision of an inclusive community characterised by hospitality centres on communities in the pursuit of knowledge production.

The valley of dreamers, Heinesen's household and various libraries are locations in the novel where strangers meet and interact with each other hospitably. Open communities are communities of learning, where scholars freely interact. These communities are rare and constantly threatened by the powerful allies of state and religion. But ordinary people also threaten such communities when they become the howling mob of Algiers, of Jutland in past and present. Community in

Mahjoub's fiction excludes the stranger and, worse, shows a tendency to become the avenging mob, hounding the hapless individual at its mercy. Within this overriding sense of cruelty, Mahjoub offers glimmers of hope in his depictions of alternative communities that can accommodate the stranger.

Similarly, in Gurnah's fiction, the migrants struggle with isolation. The communities which surround them are fortified against them. No matter how much the narrator of *Admiring Silence* tries to belong, neither his immediate family in Zanzibar nor his family in England accepts him unconditionally into their community. He is allowed to participate in communal habitation as long as he fulfils the expectations each particular community has of him. This results in a problem of identification. Being in a community requires that the individual identify with the values of the community. The migration experience however, opens up alternative ways of viewing and inhabiting in the world, and the character struggles to identify. In order not to be rejected, he acts out this identification in mimicry.

Mimicry as a way of performing belonging is critiqued in Aboulela's short story 'The Ostrich' where Majdy mistreats his wife Sumra in an attempt to seem liberal and modern. Against her wishes, he forces her not to wear the veil:

Oppressed, that's what people would think of them. Here they respect women, treat them as equal; we must be the same he says. So I have to be careful not to fall behind him in step and must bear the weight of his arm around my shoulder, another gesture he had decided to imitate to prove that though we are Arabs and Africans, we can be modern too. (Aboulela, 2001: 40)

The performance of equality and respect disallows Sumra to assert her wishes and to voice her own opinions freely. She is more oppressed by Majdy's mimicry than by the rituals of her religion and culture. The irony in the above passage points to the limitations of mimicry as a strategy of identification with a community – it is highly unlikely that the English even notice Majdy's 'modern gesture', his

sign of belonging. Aboulela and Gurnah critique the host community with its almost impermeable boundaries, which make it extremely difficult for the migrant to create a new home. In face of such inhospitable communities, the migrants in Gurnah's *By the Sea* discover that instead of constructing fictions of belonging as in mimicry, storytelling about alienation, of losing home already at home, can open spaces of connection, of hospitality. Saleh and Latif, in facing their painful intertwined pasts, create in the hours of storytelling tentative communal habitation more real than the imitation of belonging. The fact that Rachel might be part of this in the future suggests that such unexpected encounter does allow space for crossing cultural boundaries. The narratives tell stories of cultural translation, of crossings and continua of transformation and in reading these stories, the readers are invited to translate as well.

Storytelling and the Reader

I have no choice but to speak out. I shall create a space in the world with my story, a space of honesty, compassion and rebellion. I shall re-invent a place which I can call home. (Mahjoub 1994: 5, emphasis added)

Sharif, Mahjoub's narrator of *Wings of Dust*, decides that the only way to counter Sudan's political and religious authority is to tell the story of his life. This quotation suggests that the story itself becomes a translation, a space of belonging which challenges the political reality, offering an alternative view to the status quo. Exile here functions, like in Gurnah's novel *By the Sea*, as a safe place where the narrator starts to imagine new worlds. This is underlined by Edward Said's thoughts on exile, where he states that "much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. It is not surprising that so many exiles seem to be novelists, chess players, political activists, and intellectuals" (Said, 1994a: 144). Mahjoub thus uses the narrator, Sharif, as the storyteller to very consciously create room for an alternative reality characterised by compassion and honesty in the face of a state which is based on lies and cruelty.

Storytelling also functions as an act of defiance against dictatorial regimes in Gurnah's works. This is particularly obvious in *Admiring Silence*, where the threat of enforced silence stifles the protagonist's attempts at telling true stories.

Silence in this novel is the opposite of storytelling:

I picked up the newspaper, and it was full of news of the murderous fatwa Ayatollah Khomeini had just issued against the novelist Salman Rushdie. He was another admirer of silence, the Imam. (Gurnah, 1996: 209)

Rushdie, the storyteller, is pitted against the Iranian head of state, who was famous for the many different ways of silencing his subjects (Nafisi, 2003). If, as I stated earlier, migrants need to be recognised as people worthy of attention and care in order to be able to tell their story, Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* powerfully illustrates what happens if this is denied.

The protagonist becomes a mimic precisely because the people around him do not recognise his full humanity. For Emma he is a political statement, and for her parents he is solely defined by his race and connection to the British empire as a colonial subject. Gurnah's novel shows that the space which the protagonist is allowed to occupy, produces his deceptions and lies: "Wee goe brave in apparell that we may be taken for better men than wee bee" (Gurnah, 1996: 175). This epigraph which heads the last section of the novel is not so much a statement about self-aggrandisement as about not being allowed to be ordinary with weaknesses and faults. The downfall of the protagonist is his need to conform to the images other people (who usually are more powerful) have of him, his need to please. The lack of genuine stories leads to isolation: the migrant finds himself without community.

In Vassanji's *Amriika*, storytelling keeps Ramji's pain at bay after having lost Rumina. The federal agent Will Jones visits him twice a week to find out the

nature of Ramji's involvement in the terrorist bombing and they become friends of sorts in the process:

Regular as a pendulum, twice every week he's arrived at my door, and prodded and probed my memory, asked me questions about my background and ancestry, taken away my impressions about people I have known and whom he finds interesting. And I have indulged him, partly because I don't think I have much choice. Partly because I am lonely and his company is congenial. He is a good listener [...]. (Vassanji, 1999: 258-59)

The stories which Ramji tells Will, and by extension the reader, establish unequivocally that he is innocent. Stories, in Ben Okri's words, are often "the wisest surviving parts" of a person's stupidities and failures (Okri, 1997: 119). Ramji's mistakes, which result in this police interrogation, are explained away in his stories and his humanity is re-established. There is a further dimension to which the passage speaks: good stories will solicit patient listeners, who are willing to follow the character's journeys and who thus cross boundaries of space, culture and language.

The four authors share the belief that fiction, a good story has tangible social effects. If stories can momentarily interrupt prison routine – "we told stories, laughing" – as Gurnah claims in *By the Sea*, then Mahjoub's idea that stories can transcend cultural boundaries, that they counter Othering, seems convincing (Gurnah, 2001: 232). This is also the point where the reader as the invisible participant becomes important. In the interstices between the texts and the reader, in the reading process itself, new relationships are created, which challenge cultural divides. All four authors write to engage with active readers, who translate between the text and their own cultural background.

Why read a novel, which is made-up fantasy, about people who never existed, by an author who has not suffered the indignity of being forced to wear the veil? But if we reduce the world to a series of social issues [...], the books we end up with can only inspire a remote sense of sympathy, in some cases pity, horror, outrage, indignation.

What they do not do, what they cannot do, is breach the gap which objectifies the Other. Only fiction can do that. (Mahjoub, 2002: 8)

Mahjoub contrasts non-fiction with fiction in the above quotation to develop a case for the unquantifiable but nevertheless crucial intervention of literature in Orientalist/Africanist discourse. This contribution, Mahjoub asserts, lies in the possibility of encountering Others in fiction no longer as objects but with the intention of creating a cross-cultural relationship. The individual reader might not share this intention, but the intricate intersections of the personal and cultural in terms of an uneasy relation to place in this literature, inevitably forces readers to acknowledge some sort of relation to Otherness in the reading experience. It is this relation that requires cultural translation. The linkage between literature and life, between the text and the reader rests on the tacit agreement that in the hours that it takes to read a novel, the text translates the reader into another person's life – not “as [an] objective viewer or amateur anthropologist” – but as a human being imagining someone else's life (Mahjoub, 2002: 9). This happens because in the most immanent sense “stories draw threads across time and space” (Mahjoub, 2002: 9). These connections in the space between the text and the reader require a movement back and forth between worlds, people's lives, cultural contexts and languages – turning the reader into a translator. This transformation into a translator is significant in that it wrests from the reader an unspoken commitment to transformative processes, that are embodied in the translation movement back and forth. I therefore suggest that the effect of such interstitial literature is a simultaneous distancing and engaging of the reader in the implied community of translators at work. Like the migrants in the narratives, the reader might be out of place, but this is precisely the positioning from which new relationships emerge. For being out of place can be a fruitful challenge to habits and old perceptions.

The conversation across the novels by Aboulela, Mahjoub, Gurnah and Vassanji shows that cultural translation indeed passes through continua of transformation, where translated people negotiate new relationships and construct unique

transnational identities. The similar preoccupations in the texts with nostalgia, Islam, knowledge production, storytelling, mimicry and communal alliance, indicate the commonality of migration as an “existential social condition from which different ways of being and becoming are explored” (Zeleva, 2005: 2). What emerges from my weaving of these threads of conversation is a rich tapestry of multiple processes of cultural translation, of movements across space and time. The migration narratives of Aboulela, Mahjoub, Gurnah and Vassanji speak about the multiple opportunities, dangers, confusions and worlds the migrants encounter on their journeys, and it is therefore fitting to give one of these migrants the last word. Vassanji's protagonist compares his migration to an astronaut on a mission to other galaxies, capturing perfectly the terror of the vast universe and the possibility of a life-changing discovery in this median state:

When would *he* return? Someday. Meanwhile here he was, plucked out from his old life and suspended... in this silence, in this darkness, in this alien air [...]. Perhaps he was dreaming ... or had died and, now a disembodied spirit, was looking down on himself. (Vassanji, 1999: 13)

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