

The Quest for Self-Discovery: A Study of the Journey Motif in Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and Aboulela's *The Translator*

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to investigate how the journey motif plays a pivotal role in the works of Arab women writers in diaspora. Through a close reading of Arab American novelist Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and Arab British novelist Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999), the paper highlights how the journeys taken by Khadra and Sammar, respectively, govern each of these two novels structurally and thematically. As they make journeys to their home towns in Syria and Sudan, respectively, they edge closer toward self-discovery. Therefore, the journeys the characters embark on are linked to their inner search for their own identities. Khadra and Sammar gain knowledge, better understand life, and consequently, better understand themselves. Overall, the paper shows how investigating the importance of journeys and travels in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and *The Translator* helps shed light on how Khadra and Sammar negotiate their cultural circumstances and cope with pressing social demands. In this sense, the two women personify resilience, courage and self-respect since they resist social pressures and decide to challenge them.*

Keywords: journeys, Mohja Kahf, Leila Aboulela, Arabic literature in diaspora

1. Introduction

This paper examines how the journey motif plays a pivotal role in the works of Arab women writers in diaspora. Specifically, this paper investigates this motif in Arab American novelist Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and Arab British novelist Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999). The journeys taken by Khadra and Sammar, respectively, govern the structure of each of these two novels. Khadra and Sammar make journeys to their home towns in Syria and Sudan to have new perspectives on the trajectories their lives have taken. They travel to look for freedom when they are trapped by inclement socioeconomic, cultural and political conditions. Through their journeys towards freedom, they go through different experiences that help in broadening their horizons and transforming their characters and personalities. Therefore, the journeys the characters embark on are linked to their inner search for their own identities. As the two women travel, they gain knowledge, better understand life, and consequently, better understand themselves.

Kahf and Aboulela may be grouped under the category of Arab women writers in diaspora; nevertheless, one should be aware of the different historical, socioeconomic, political and cultural contexts that govern the experiences of each of them. As Yousef Awad succinctly puts it, "Arab immigration and settlement patterns in Britain and the US have 'entailed highly localised patterns

of interaction with prevailing social, political and economic conditions” (2012: 5-6). Yet, the journey motif links the two novels in a way that makes it visible to investigate how these journeys shape each protagonist’s experiences and help each to reach an epiphany.

Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* sheds light on the hardships an Arab Muslim woman undergoes when she lives in-between cultures. The novel recounts the story of Khadra Shamy, a Syrian girl who has moved with her family to the United States. Khadra feels isolated from her surroundings and she does not seamlessly fit in her society. Her life is actually made up of many journeys that she takes, willingly or unwillingly, which help in the transformation of her character. The first journey is the one that she took with her family to the United States as a child where she undergoes many experiences that hybridize her identity. The second journey is the one that she has taken to Mecca with her family to perform pilgrimage. After this journey, Khadra returns to the United States as a completely different person with new attitudes about herself and her religion. But her journey to Syria is considered to be the turning point in her life since she decides to be alone to reconsider her choices. The last journey is the one that she takes to Philadelphia, a journey that one may view as a continuation of her journey to Syria. There, she starts a life of her own and she puts the things she learned into practice.

Similarly, the journey motif plays a crucial role in Aboulela’s *The Translator*, a novel that depicts the hardships that an Arab Muslim woman faces in diaspora. Sammar, the protagonist of the novel, is a Sudanese woman who falls prey to depression after the death of her husband; she leaves everything in Sudan and flees to Scotland thinking that she will forget the past and start a new life. In Scotland, Sammar meets Dr. Rae Isle whom she falls in love with. As Rae refuses to convert to Islam, Sammar goes back to Sudan where she begins to think about her life and future. Therefore, her journey to Sudan echoes her journey towards self-discovery and self-realization. The author succeeds in showing how the two journeys taken by the protagonist, first to Scotland and then back to Khartoum, play an essential role in shaping Sammar’s personality and identity.

As the above two paragraphs show, there are many similarities between the two novels, especially as far as the journey motif is concerned. The sense of dissatisfaction and disgruntlement, for example, prevails at the beginning of each novel. Khadra used to cry heavily for nights not knowing why; similarly, Sammar also lost the color and brightness in her life and she wore no colors following the tragic death of her husband. Moreover, there is a turning point in the life of each of the two protagonists that instigates a self-discovery journey. The turning point in Khadra’s life is her divorce and her abortion, while Sammar’s separation from Rae may be considered as a life changing event. The two protagonists have also developed during the course of each novel mainly because they have taken a journey of self-discovery: Khadra learns how to be proud of all aspects of her hybridized identity and Sammar, at the end, learns how to clear her intention towards Rae’s conversion. So, journeys are crucial for

the protagonist's lives. The journeys that the two protagonists take are quite empowering as they transform their personalities and enable them to better understand the world in which they live. In this sense, the two women epitomize resilience, courage and self-respect since they resist social pressures and decide to challenge them.

2. The journey motif in literature

In *Gendered Journeys, Mobile Emotions*, Gayle Letherby and Gillian Reynolds argue that "travel is more than the concept of transport, or being transported from A to B" (2009: xviii). Writers let their characters travel to different places for different reasons; hence, their journeys involve more than mere movement. Examples from literary works are abundant and in each text traveling serves many different purposes. In fact, interest in travel and travel writings emerged at the end of the twentieth century as James Duncan and Derek Gregory explain in their book *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*. The authors argue that "the closing decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a double explosion of interest in travel writing" (1999: 1). Travel literature records the experiences of writers or their protagonists traveling to other places within the same country or to different countries. The journeys taken by the travelers, regardless of the motive, transforms the personality of the traveler. As Elieen Groom puts it, "whatever the journey's motive [. . .] journey changes both the country visited and the self that travels" (2005: 183). In the two novels examined in this paper, the two protagonists' views of the countries they live in and travel to are informed by the experiences they undergo, and eventually, Khadra and Sammar discover new realities about their own identities, societies and life.

In this context, Sara Mills and Shirley Foster argue that "travel writing as a genre has been perceived as prototypically masculine" (2002: 5). But in recent times, it can be noticed that women writers also tend to use this genre to present women's issues. Therefore, women writers, who are interested in exploring women's issues, rely on the idea of travel to represent the obstacles women face and the ways to deal with these obstacles. In *Great Women Travel Writers: From 1750 to the Present*, Alba Amoia and Bettina L. Knapp discuss the importance of journeys in women's lives and argue that for women "travel is sacred. It is a quest. Travel is a passion [. . .] It is a learning process, a distraction, a novelty, a dream fulfilled" (2005: 9). This shows how the idea of the journey plays an important role in shaping women's personalities. In fact, one may argue that Khadra's and Sammar's personalities are greatly shaped by the journeys they undertake as they encounter new people and come across fresh facts about their own identities, family members and societies.

The literary works that concentrate on the idea of the character's transformation and development belong to the bildungsroman genre. These works focus on the protagonist's search of identity from youth to adulthood and this usually leads to their moral and psychological transformation during the course of the work. This genre of literature was exclusively male-dominated but later women writers succeeded in writing their own female bildungsroman. In

this context, Camilla Brandstorm states that the genre of a female bildungsroman becomes possible when “social and cultural changes made it possible for women to leave their place in the home and join the men’s world to engage in exploration and self-development” (2009: 7).

Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Arab writers have been introduced to the genre of the novel via various cultural avenues. What is quite fascinating here is that early Arab novelists have written novels, whether in Arabic or English, in which journeys play a significant role, structurally and thematically. Ameen Rihani’s *The Book of Khalid* (1911), Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s *The Ship* (1970) are examples of novels written by Arab authors in which journeys are of paramount importance. More recently, Arab writers in diaspora have highlighted the significance of journeys and travels in their novels. As the following discussion shows, the journey motif can be seen as a metaphor of discovery: it is not only the discovery of new places and ideas but also the discovery of one’s own self.

3. The quest for truth in Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

Mohja Kahf (b. 1967) is an Arab-American poet and novelist. As an Arab and Muslim writer, her own notion of Islamic feminism influences the themes she probes in her writings. Her works explore issues related to cross-cultural communication. Through her works, Kahf intends to prove, as Carol Fadda-Conrey succinctly puts it, that “Muslim Americans are entitled to belong to the United States, with their various identifications (as Muslims, Americans, feminists) complementing rather than contradicting each other” (2007: 169).

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf is Kahf’s first and sole novel so far. In her review of the novel, Neil Macfarquhar asserts that the novel has turned Kahf “into something of an idol among Muslim American women” (2007: 3). The novel has been described as being “refreshingly human, sensitive and passionate, bright, vivid and important, and indeed beautifully written” (Al Maleh 2009: 31). In her in-depth analysis of discussion of Kahf’s novel, Fadda-Conrey states that the novel “includes representations of multiple and varied return journeys or homecomings, incorporating the physical as well as the spiritual” (2014: 69-70).

The novel chronicles the journey of Kahf’s protagonist towards the discovery of her identity. As the novel starts, Khadra is uncertain to which culture she belongs. She thinks that becoming an American means betraying her Arab and Muslim identity. This confusion is intensified when her family gains the American citizenship. Khadra’s conflicted emotions appear clearly in these lines:

To her, taking citizenship felt like giving up, giving in. After all she’d been through at school, defending her identity against the jeering kids who vaunted America’s superiority as the clincher put-down to everything she said, everything she was. Wasn’t she supposed to be an Islamic warrior woman, a Nusayba, a Sumaya, An Um Salama in exile, by the waters dark, of Babylon? (2006: 141)

Khadra is unable to consider America as her home country although it is the place that she has truly known. She used to think of Syria or maybe Saudi Arabia, because of its religious importance, as her home and where she belongs. Thus, she decides to travel to Mecca where she can feel at home.

Khadra wants to find her real home because as other immigrants, she “must engage in the process of locating and committing to a new home, regardless of whether that home is hostile or hospitable” (Lampert 2008: 3). According to Fadda-Conrey:

Khadra’s return to this ground that didn’t love her gives way to accounts of other journeys of return and rearrival, starting in the first part of the novel with Khadra traveling with her family to the bosom of Muslim belonging, namely Mecca (2014: 70).

Yet, the journey she has taken to Mecca changes all her ideas about home, identity and belonging. As Sandhya Rao Mehta argues, “it requires a physical journey to the roots, a pilgrimage to Mecca where the family hopes to discover the purest form of Islam that she [Khadra] gets her rudest shock” (2014: 127). In Saudi Arabia, Khadra has been exposed to a different kind of Islam where young girls, for example, used to have relations with the other sex. It is not the kind of Islam she has been expecting to see.

When her cousin, Afaf, introduces her as an American, she finds herself unconsciously defending the Americans. She has been also sexually harassed there and she has been arrested by the religious police for going to pray Al-Fajr Prayer [Dawn Prayer] in the mosque. The idea of women praying in mosques with men has been widely discussed by many Islamic feminists such as Margot Badran, Miriam Cooke and Asma Barlas. Badran argues that the majority of mosques are designed in a way that expresses “a patriarchal ethos” that accords men the main or central space in the mosque (2009: 336). In this sense, Kahf’s novel explores the consequences of this act of exclusion and marginalization on women. It is not surprising then that Khadra questions the Islamic teachings her parents have been passing to her since her childhood. For Khadra, a new concept of home emerges as the family prepares to return to the United States: “Khadra was glad to be going home. ‘Home’ – she said without thinking” (2006: 179).

Khadra’s marriage is seen as another turning point in her life that eventually forces her to travel and cross new borders. Khadra gets married in a conventional manner, and eventually, her marriage proves dysfunctional. Her pregnancy makes the situation more uncomfortable for her and it brings her even closer to her journey abroad. She wants to find her true self because she believes that people have “to have a self to even start a journey to God” (2006: 248). She begins to realize that embarking on a journey becomes a necessity and there is no way to escape it. Khadra begins to ask a number of questions:

And then what? Where do you go when the first part of your life is coming to an end, and you don’t know what is yet unborn inside you? Where do you go when you’re in a free fall, unmoored, safety net gone, and nothing to anchor you? (Kahf 2006: 265).

Khadra highlights the significance of going to another place to redeem the wounds that she has been suffering from after her divorce. She needs to be away from everything she knows so as to be reconciled with herself.

Khadra's insistence on the idea of moving by using the words "where" and "go" foregrounds the imminence of Khadra's next journey. In a way, Khadra's words echo those of Arab British novelist Robin Yassin-Kassab, who, in an interview with Catherine Rashid, argues that:

We are all travellers, out of place in the world, and physical migrants are those forced into awareness of this condition. The resulting sense of otherness and in-betweenness, when it doesn't lead to a defensive fossilisation of identity, offers enriched perspectives and an impatience with assumption. To see all lands as foreign, through the eyes of a *musafir* – there is something here which Islam and novel-writing share (2012: 154).

For Yassin-Kassab, travelling enables people to see life with fresh eyes. Commenting on Yassin-Kassab's words, Rashid insists that "[t]he image of the *musafir* (which means 'traveller' in Arabic and connotes the *hijra* in Islamic theology) hails a sentiment [. . .] to transcend nationality in order to inhabit it, and the world, better" (2012: 154).

Khadra understands that in order for her to find answers to all her questions, she needs to go "back where she came from: Syria" (2006: 266). She feels that there is no place better than her homeland where she can start her journey of self-discovery and self-realization. There, Khadra believes, she will meet different people and she will experience many things that will help in changing the way she perceives herself as well as others. As Mehta puts it, Khadra "chooses to go back to Syria in search of emotional and personal fulfillment and meaning" (2014: 127).

In Syria, Khadra meets her grandmother who has a great influence over her. Her grandmother explains that she has been waiting for her. Interestingly, when her grandmother sees her, she recites a Quranic verse which highlights the significance of travelling and journeying: "Glory to God who hath taken His servant on a journey through night". In a way, Kahf links Prophet Mohammad's journey from Mecca to Jerusalem to Khadra's, foregrounding the centrality of this journey to Khadra's life and psychological progress. Fadda-Conrey explains that "the journeys to an Arab homeland ... are often instigated by a desire to return to the geographical and national roots of diasporic Arab identities, or to what is simply defined as familiar" (2014: 66). Indeed, this journey is the turning point in the protagonist's life since it opens her eyes to new things and helps her see with a different lens.

Her grandmother tells her stories about her family, including that of her mother's rape. After hearing this story, Khadra begins to understand why her mother, Ebtihaj, is overprotective. The story of Ebtihaj's suffering in a Muslim country makes "Khadra come to appreciate the freedom she enjoys in America where she is free to practice her religion without persecution" (Alakarawi 2013:104). This is how this journey has helped her to change her views towards

her parents and her country, America, and this helps her in reconciling with her American identity. The journey here is a catalyst for change and knowledge. As Fadda-Conrey succinctly puts it, “similar to Mecca trip, Khadra’s journey to Syria as a place of origin(s) is crucial for her revised self-understanding” (2014: 75). Travelling to Syria gives Khadra the opportunity to look at things with fresh eyes and gives her the space to mull over her future plans and career. Her journey to Syria has given her a clear vision about the kind of person she wants to be. While on a trip to Mount Qasyoon in Syria, Khadra realizes that photography is her thing. Thus, she decides to get a degree in photography and to make living out of it. Her camera is a symbol of the new way she is going to look at and perceive things.

Moreover, Khadra’s journey to Syria gives her an opportunity to reassess her relationship with her veil. The way Khadra dresses before and after the journey manifests her development and growth. At the beginning, she used to wear a veil with one color which, to a large extent, reflects the way she used to look at life and things. While in Syria, she decides that she should take off her veil because she wants to give “herself some relief from being judged by a piece of cloth” (Alakarawi 2013: 104). She realizes that “veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary; how both light and dark are connected moments in the development of the soul in its darkroom” (Kahf 2006: 309). Eventually, Khadra puts on a tangerine scarf. She keeps it loose and touching her cheek “like the hand of a lover” (2006: 313). In the US, Khadra prefers to put on the veil most of the time since “it was something her body felt at home in” (2006: 374). The cover of the novel sums up Khadra’s awareness of her hybrid identity as she appears wearing a tangerine scarf indicating her Arab and Muslim identity and blue jeans that stand for her American identity. In a way, Khadra’s clothes reflect the harmony and elegance created by sensibly mixing the two components of her identity. Combining different elements of her cultural heritage adds a touch of depth and serenity to Khadra’s personality.

So, it is her journey to her homeland that helps her find that comfort while wearing her veil. By making her decision to wear the veil, Khadra is actually contesting the idea that many Westerners have about the veil and how it is considered as a kind of oppression practiced against Muslim women. Fadwa El-Guindi clarifies the misconceptions that people have about the veil. She illustrates that the way Muslim women dress has no connections with the oppression or suppression practiced against women. She also stresses that veiling is connected with the notions of the self, the body and community. She states that veiling is “largely about identity, largely about privacy- of space and body” (1999: xvii).

Khadra’s various journeys have transformed her identity and her self-perception. She now realizes that part of her is American, a part that she used to persistently negate in her earlier days. She also realizes that “going overseas was what enabled her to see that she was irrevocably American” and now she needs

is to learn how to deal with it (2006: 391). On the plane back to America, Khadra is aware of the fact that she is headed home. Khadra meditates:

She loved the country of her origin, and found that something in the soil there, in the air, in the layout of the streets and the architecture of buildings, answered a basic need in her, and corresponded to the deep structure of her taxonomy ... But she knew at last that it was in the American crucible where her character had been gorged, for good or ill (Kahf 2006: 313).

Only by travelling to Syria, Khadra learns how to accept and be proud of the different aspects of her hybridized identity. In fact, Khadra's realization is a reminder of Stuart Hall's stipulation that identity is not an "already accomplished fact" but rather it is a "production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (1990: 392). Halls insists that cultural identities change and transcend time, place and history (1990: 394).

Although Khadra's own identity has changed after her journey to Syria, she has not been yet ready to go to Indianapolis where she has to face her family and the Dawah Center community. She prefers to be alone and to start her life over in Philadelphia by herself where she can attend a college to get a degree in photography and learn how to depend on herself. She sees herself as a person with two sides and her main concern is to bring them together harmoniously. She says, "I guess what I've been doing is trying to get to a place where I could reconnect the two and be a whole person" (2006: 395).

At last, Khadra has made a crucial decision by accepting her company's offer to go back to Indianapolis where she is going to face her past. She considers this last journey to be "good for her self-actualization" as it will help bring the two parts of herself together (2006: 389). Fadda-Conrey states that "Khadra's return to Indiana as an adult becomes an entryway into reassessing the trajectories of belonging to the places and homes to which she has imaginatively and physically connected throughout her life" (2014: 70). Khadra knows that her journey to Syria has helped her reach to the place where she belongs and where she feels free. Lampert argues that "for Kahf, the experience of diaspora, while still intensely difficult, promises agency and liberation" (2008: 159). By the end of the novel Khadra "knows she is where she belongs, doing what she must do, with intent, with abandon" (2006: 441). Khadra, whose name in Arabic literally means the green one and metaphorically means the naïve and innocent one, is more experienced and mature after she returns from her journeys.

4. Resilience, Islam and new horizons in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*

As the previous section shows, Khadra's journey towards self-discovery involves a reconciliation between the different components of her identity, including her identity as a Muslim. Islam is also a major motivating force in Leila Aboulela's novel *The Translator* and it helps the protagonist Sammar embark on her own journey in life. This section shows how Sammar, a Sudanese

woman who is proud of her country and her religion, decides to flee with her religion and go on a journey of self-understanding when she feels that she has to choose between her religion and her love for Rae, the non-Muslim scholar.

Leila Aboulela (b. 1964) is a Sudanese novelist, a playwright and a short-story writer who writes in English. From 2000, she and her family travelled between many cities like, Jakarta, Doha, Dubai, Abu Dhabi before moving to Aberdeen again to settle in 2012. She is a writer with a rich experience of travelling, a fact that is crucial to understand her fiction. In an interview with Africa Book Club, Aboulela explains the importance of being a well-travelled person by saying that “it was travelling that first made me a writer ... I was very homesick for Khartoum. People around me did not know much about Sudan or about Islam, the two things that made up my identity” (3).

In her fiction, Aboulela subverts some of the misconceptions that Westerners have about Muslim and Arab women who, as Md. Mahmudul Hasan puts it, are portrayed as “subservient to their husbands with no equal rights [. . .] and most notably always kept under the veil of ignorance and at home” (2015: 90). Aboulela highlights how religion helps her protagonists find their identities and determine who they are. They, to quote Wail Hassan, attempt to “harmonize their desires and actions with the dictates of Islamic beliefs, law, and rituals [. . .] while living in a society that views them and their religion with various degrees of suspicion and hostility” (2011: 192).

The Translator is Aboulela’s first novel and upon its publication in 1999, it was well-received by different kinds of readers. It is set in Scotland and Sudan in the period after 1991 and it examines the everlasting encounter between the East and the West. A source of inspiration for *The Translator* is Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). In this context, Brendan Smyth highlights the similarities between the two novels in his article ‘The challenges of orientalism: Teaching about Islam and masculinity in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*’ (2007: 349). But Aboulela dares to go even further when she shows the East as the part which is in control. She reverses the traditional narrative of the dominance of the West over the East by presenting a brown Arab woman who plays the role of a savior of a white man as Sammar tells Rae that being a Muslim “would be good for you. It will make you stronger” (1999: 89). In fact, Smyth shows how Sammar “does not need a white man to save her. Instead, she saves him physically and spiritually” (2007: 177). As Christina Phillips puts it, Sammar’s “energy next to Rae’s physical weakness [. . .] represents a reversal of traditional gender roles which see women as the weaker party” (2012: 70).

In the essay ‘Moving away from accuracy’, Aboulela justifies the reasons of her writings by saying:

To prove that Khartoum is nicer than London, more beautiful than Edinburgh ... I don’t think so. Not to prove, but to express, to show, that it is a valid place, a valid way of life beyond the stereotypical images of famine and war, not a backward place to be written off (2002: 204).

As the above quotation illustrates, Aboulela tries to change the way the West views her country so as to have a relationship that is based on understanding and mutual respect. In this sense, Aboulela plays a role prescribed for her by Ferial Jabouri Ghazoul who argues that “Arab writers who write in English, French, and Italian are [. . .] cultural ambassadors who are able to voice a previously silenced point of view” (2006: 121-122).

Aboulela’s *The Translator* records the life of a young Sudanese woman named Sammar who loses her husband in a car accident. She leaves her son, Amir, in Sudan and moves to Scotland to work as a translator in a university in Aberdeen. After the death of her husband, Sammar goes into a state of grief. What brings her back to life is the attraction she starts to have towards a Scottish specialist on Islam and the Middle East named Dr. Rae Isle. Sammar asks Rae to convert so they can get married but he does not agree and he asks her to leave. She returns to Khartoum where she re-joins her son and her late husband’s family and so she starts to reconnect with her previous life. There, she realizes that she has been selfish as she has persistently wanted Rae to convert for her own benefit and this becomes the turning point in her life. In Khartoum, she learns how to get rid of her egocentrism and to behave as a true Muslim so she starts to pray that Rae may convert for his own good. The miracle happens: Rae converts to Islam and the two get married.

Carol Anderson states that this novel “portrays a young Sudanese woman’s journey and perceptions of space around and with her, in Aberdeen and Khartoum” (2012: 121). Aboulela sheds light on the journeys that the protagonist has taken, first, to Scotland after the death of her husband and, then, back to Khartoum after being engaged in an unsuccessful relationship with Rae. She succeeds in showing how each journey plays a pivotal role in shaping Sammar’s personality. Heather Hewett argues that “the novel’s narration of multidirectional journeys undertaken for multiple reasons [. . .] parallels its representation of complex multidimensional characters” (2009: 252).

The two journeys that Sammar has taken can be seen as the catalyst and the healer of her wounds and miseries. In her article ‘Travel is part of faith’, Aboulela endorses the Sufi viewpoint that journeys and travels are important and she cites a certain Sufi thinker who states that “travel away from home and the difficulties will be a medicine of your ego’s badness, you will return softer and wiser” (2002: 41). This is the very idea that is discussed by Pink Dandelion who asserts that, “travel [. . .] is key to new wisdom” (2013: 9). These two journeys have also paved the way for the last one which Sammar will take after her reunion with Rae (Hassan 2011: 183). Hassan valorizes the idea that journeys control the novel both thematically and structurally and insists that they have substantially influenced Sammar’s character.

At the beginning, Sammar has had a peaceful life where she has a caring husband, Tarig, and a son, Amir. She and her husband decide to leave their homeland, Sudan, and to travel to Scotland where he can pursue a degree in medicine there and they can provide a better life for themselves and their son. Everything changes after the tragic car accident in which she loses her husband.

After taking his corpse to Khartoum for burial, she goes into a state of depression as she has not been able to cope with the loss of her loving husband. Therefore, Sammar packs up and returns to Aberdeen to mourn the death of her husband alone. She thinks that by leaving her homeland and traveling abroad, she will be able to forget, or at least escape, the pain she has been suffering from. She also thinks that by abandoning her own son, she can traverse her past to start a new life.

For four years, she wears no colors, no perfume, no make-up, and she has minimum things or furniture in her home if it can be called home since “she lived in a room with nothing on the wall, nothing personal, no photographs, no books; just like a hospital room” (1999: 15). She has given everything away and her prayers have been the only thing that keep her in touch with reality and without them she would have “lost awareness of the shift of day into night” (1999: 16). According to Nadia Butt, Sammar “imposes isolation on herself, believing that the way to spiritual elation is a loner’s journey” (2009: 173). On the surface of it, Sammar’s journey to Scotland yields no good effects to her life; instead of forgetting the past and her sad memories, Sammar’s sojourn in Scotland deepens her woes.

Yet, a deeper investigation of the influence of this journey on Sammar makes us see how crucial it is for changing her life. Meeting Rae transforms Sammar’s life: she feels that he is familiar to her. Her job as a translator brings her back to life and it awakens in Sammar all the longing for life she has repressed. She feels happy being a translator because it gives her the chance to help Rae see and understand her country, so she tries through her job to “[mould] Arabic into English, trying to be transparent like a pane of glass not obscuring the meaning of any word” (1999: 167). Sammar starts to take care of herself as she used to do before Tarig’s death (1999: 37). When Sammar hears that Rae is in hospital, she rushes to see him without thinking. When she reaches the hospital, “she felt like she had travelled miles to get here, struggled, pushed her way through fog and quicksand” (1999: 83). Sammar, here, associates her love for Rae with the idea of traveling. In fact, she has needed to travel miles inside herself to finally realize that she is in love with Rae.

Sammar realizes that there will be no future for them if he does not convert so she asks him to convert Islam, a request that Rae refuses to accept (1999: 98). As a consequence, Sammar rushes into the journey that has been assigned for her to Cairo as a part of her job. When forced to choose between her love for Rae and her religion, she flies with her religion to Sudan. Thus, Sammar’s journey to Khartoum can be seen as a retreat from a shocking reality that she cannot cope with.

In fact, Sammar’s journey to Sudan has completely changed her and the way she thinks. She realizes that she has to go on with her life without Rae so she quits her job as a translator and she chooses to stay in Sudan to start a new life. Being in Sudan proves crucial for her spiritual development as she faces such a harsh reality like poverty, illiteracy, starvation and diseases. Confronting all these things makes Sammar a better Muslim who feels obliged to thank Allah

for all the blisses bestowed upon her (1999: 165). The fact that she is away from Rae never prevents Sammar from thinking about him. John Stotesbury argues that “while Sammar’s soul remains embedded - rooted - in Islam, her heart remains in Scotland” (2004: 77). She comforts herself that Rae will get in touch with her so she waits to hear anything from him. But her courage to stay faithful to her love for Rae and her prayers for him makes her a different person who is able to “negotiate and even reject certain Muslim and Sudanese scripts about womanhood” (Hewett 2009: 264).

Sammar proves that she is an unconventional woman who chooses to live her life the way she wants even if she needs to confront her conservative society that is presented here in her mother-in-law. She refuses to play the role of the ideal widow spending the rest of her life mourning her late husband. In fact, moving between Scotland and Sudan has widened Sammar’s horizons and enabled her to think outside the box. She reappraises her life, mulls over the decisions she has taken, and eventually, admits that she was selfish and self-centered when she wished that Rae may convert for her own sake. She had never thought of what Islam might mean to him or change in him as a person; she just wanted him to be a suitable husband for her: “She had never, not once, prayed that he would become a Muslim for his own sake, for his own good. It has been always for herself, her need to get married again, not to be alone” (1999: 175).

She never thinks of translating Islam to him as a gift from Allah. As Brenda Cooper puts it, Sammar’s inability “to effect this translation between her worlds in Africa and in Britain [. . .] crushes her identity, diminishes her being and renders her senseless with physical, bodily pain” (2008: 44). But one should note that Cooper’s words describe Sammar’s status before she travels to Sudan in protest against Rae’s humiliation of her. Being away from him, she learns how to clear her intentions towards him and his conversion and she starts praying that he might do it for his own sake even if he is not going to marry her: “She would do it now from far away without him ever knowing. It would be her secret. If it took ten months or ten years or twenty or more” (1999: 175). Sammar’s journey to Sudan has created a distance deemed necessary for her to think about Rae from a different perspective. Had she remained in Scotland, she would not have had the ability to see Rae’s needs.

By the same token, Rae has also needed to go through a journey of his own to reconsider his priorities and to decide what he desires to do. After Sammar’s departure, Rae has the space and the freedom needed to reconsider his choices. In a way, Sammar’s journey to Sudan has not only influenced her self-perception and worldview, but it also has had a bearing on Rae’s perspectives and thoughts. Eventually, the miracle happens: Rae converts to Islam. When the news of Rae’s conversion reaches Sammar, she is thankful to God that she has been rewarded for clearing her intentions. After the miracle, she is ready now to go on her third journey with Rae to Scotland where she is going to start a new life with no pain or suffering. As Amer Al-Adwan and Yousef Awad argue, it is Sammar’s faith which helps her in making her life such “an endurable lived experience” (2013: 354). At the end of the novel, Sammar proves that she has

succeeded, as Aboulela mentions in an interview with Claire Chambers, in “translating Islam for Rae. She is the agent of his change. She shows him that Islam is relevant to him too and points out that he needs it” (2009: 95). In this sense, Sammar’s journey to Sudan has not only made her a better person, but it also has refined her skills as a translator, and even, a savior.

5. Conclusion

As the above discussion shows, investigating the importance of journeys and travels in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and *The Translator* helps shed light on how Khadra and Sammar negotiate their cultural circumstances and cope with pressing social demands. In analyzing the theme of journeying and travelling in these two novels, it can be noticed that the journey motif plays a pivotal role in shaping the identity of the two protagonists. If one traces the life of Khadra and Sammar from the beginning to the end, one can see clearly the effect their journeys have left on them. At the beginning, they appear to be weak, passive and confused. After suffering from different kinds of oppressions, each woman chooses to make a journey that ultimately changes her life. Their journeys are more than moving from one place to another since they discover who they are and what they should do in life. The journey each protagonist takes, to borrow Alison Blunt’s words, “can be seen as a psychological journey, relating to the theme of the journey of life and self-discovery” (1994: 21). The outward journey is usually connected with an inner one that plays an important role in shaping the personality of the traveler. These journeys reveal so much about the protagonists, that by the end of the novels, readers have a much better understanding of them. At the end of the journeys, Khadra and Sammar have reached a state of equilibrium and reconciliation with themselves. They finally become able to decide for themselves and decide what their desires and needs exactly are.

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