Leila Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley*: Crossing the Sudan, Egypt, and Britain

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Abstract
This study looks at travel as a search for identity, where the act of movement represents the ideal sum of motion and emotion. Taking as its starting point recent critical studies on travel writing, postcolonial and translation studies, and migration theories, the analysis aims to cast light on Leila Aboulela's novel *Lyrics Alley*, investigating the relationship between travel and migration as dynamic concepts which are dependent upon the mechanism of cultural translation.
The article scrutinises the theoretical and practical modalities which make Aboulela's text a site of intersection between fluctuating territories. *Lyrics Alley* testifies to the way in which the experiences of travelling and translating act as contemporary metaphors for Muslim subjects, and also surveys the procedures by which Sudan, Egypt and Britain become non-permanent geographical spaces. Migrant characters who traverse Sudanese alleyways, Egyptian metropolitan streets and British routes act as translators as well as travellers, whose journeys towards in-between places lead them to cross boundaries, entering new territories and creating new subjectivities.

> In you Egypt are the causes of my injury.
> And in Sudan my burden and solace
>
> (Leila Aboulela, 2010a)

1. Introduction

This study originates in the idea of travel as a search for identity, where the very act of movement, both physical and imaginary, involves embarking on temporal and spatial itineraries. Transition from one place to another implies living in shifting and non-permanent locations within reality. These are the transitory spaces occupied by both female and male characters in Leila Aboulela's latest African novel, *Lyrics Alley,* which represents a point of

intersection between postcolonial studies (Di Piazza 2004), travel writing, and cultural translation. The text is a translated space where characters experience both placement and displacement, being confronted by a complex cultural and linguistic interface which influences the formation of their own identities. Taking as its starting point recent critical examinations of travel studies and postcolonial and translation theories, this paper aims to cast light on *Lyrics Alley* as an example of postcolonial writing, in which cultural translation is practised and travel represents a dynamic element enveloping the whole narrative. In Aboulela's novel fluid territories are navigated and travelling subjectivities struggle to find lost identities down Sudanese alleyways, along Egyptian trade-routes and on city streets in Britain. Here, travel and translation produce a "continual creative motion" (Anzaldúa 1987: 80), providing the means for crossing boundaries, entering new territories and forging new identities.

In the geographies of *Lyrics Alley,* cultural translation entails migratory fluxes and is in fact a consequence of migration, which manifests itself as an articulated form of travel both within Africa and from Africa to England. Cultural translation works as a concept within postcolonial theory as well as in translation studies (Steiner 2009), but also as an instrument which manipulates the English language to signify the experiences of migrant subjects. English becomes the linguistic instrument which allows the African writer to describe African locations as translated spaces, as Africans themselves act as translators of their own native nation. Cultural translation is not a procedure that seeks to erase difference in order to maintain conformity; instead, it implicitly describes an act of transportation of diverse African customs, traditions, and ideologies from one place to another. Invested with this metaphorical function, to put it in Harish Trivedi's terms (2001), cultural translation is but a common condition of the postcolonial world, where the image of migrant subjects as travellers and translators is strengthened. In Aboulela's novel, it is in particular the Egyptian characters who travel and translate. By not conforming to Sudanese rules and ways of life, the Egyptian subjects perform their cultural translations not as instruments of assimilation, but as vehicles of reinforcement of cultural difference within a (nearly) post-independent African country. Cultural translation is thus the metaphor at the heart of

Lyrics Alley, making the text itself a place of inter-African translations, whereas England is just a marginal setting.

The actions and settings in *Lyrics Alley* move from Umdurman, where reverberations of the Mahdi's uprising can still be found, to Khartoum, a Muslim city of seven churches and two mosques; from cosmopolitan Alexandria to a Cairo of dwindling fezzes and competitive women. There is also a hospital trip to a technologically advanced but devastated London. Two important divorces, Egypt's from the Sudan and Britain's from Egypt, provide the backdrop to the story of the Abuzeid family in a period, during the Second World War, when the Free Officers in Egypt were engaged in revolution and the Sudan was on the brink of independence from Britain. Set in 1950s pre-independence Sudan[1], *Lyrics Alley* tells the tragic story of Nur, the handsome heir to the Abuzeid family's prosperous trading business, who plunges from a sea-side cliff in Alexandria, smashing several vertebrae in his back and thus shattering any hopes of higher education in Britain, followed by a good job and an idyllic marriage to his beloved cousin, Soraya. She is the daughter of Idris Abuzeid, Nur's uneducated uncle and younger brother of Mahmoud, who is widowed with three daughters. Mahmoud, on the other hand, has two wives: Waheeba, the Sudanese mother of Nur and Nassir, and Nabilah, the Egyptian mother of Ferial and Farouk.

2. *Lyrics Alley* and its theoretical background

The impact of travel, migration, and cultural translation on diasporic communities traversing nations and continents testifies to the centrality of these phenomena, as well as the corresponding concepts, in European and non-European societies, and to their

[1] The label "Anglo-Egyptian Sudan" refers to the period in which Sudan was administered by a condominium of Egypt and the United Kingdom between 1899 and 1956. In 1899 an Anglo-Egyptian agreement declared that Sudan was to be administered by a governor appointed by Egypt with British approval. When the British ended their occupation of Egypt in 1936, they kept their forces in Sudan. It was the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 which brought an end to the British occupation of Sudan. The monarchy was abolished in 1953 and Egypt abandoned its sovereignty over Sudan, which in turn led to the eventual end of British colonisation in Sudan. In 1954 a treaty guaranteeing Sudanese independence was signed by Egyptian and British forces. In 1956 Sudan became an independent sovereign state.

crucial role in the representation of the fluidity and global mobility of subjectivities. It is on such a cultural framework that *Lyrics Alley* is built, and this makes it a novel concerned with travel and travel studies, not simply because its fictional characters cross continents and national borders, but also because their concept of *home* is presented in a dual dimension: it is both a state of mind and a physical, tangible geographical location. In *Lyrics Alley*, left-behind places and remembered territories exist through cultural translation, a process which contributes to ground the characters' sense of self in alien lands. Translation and travel make Aboulela's work a textual space of cultural encounters between Africans themselves, between Africans and Europeans, and between Islam and secularism. This allows us to classify her work as travel writing, a genre which, to put it in James Clifford's terms, produces an "increasingly complex range of experiences, which may in the end conduct to cultural translation" (1997: 3). Travel makes cultural translation the constitutive and constructive element in *Lyrics Alley*, in which cultural forms of translation take place because a Sudanese man crosses national borders and marries an Egyptian woman, but also because that same African man does business with the English. Cultural encounters make the text a site of pluralities, a place of travel, where three geographical places – Sudan, Egypt, and England – communicate in terms of translated spaces. Cultural translation and travel create postcolonial subjectivities as a consequence of cultural connections – shaped by transcultural experiences.

Lyrics Alley thus represents a postcolonial novel of travel, migration and cultural translation, where African and non-African characters act as both travellers and *cultural* translators. By moving from Sudan to Egypt and eventually reaching London, the Western metropolis, Aboulela's work becomes the site of a junction between two continents, a colonised Africa and a colonising Europe; but the novel is also the location where two African countries, Sudan and Egypt, clash. From a theoretical perspective, Aboulela's African novel synthesises different critical approaches to the exploration of contemporary literature in terms of postcolonialism, migration, translation, and travel studies. *Lyrics Alley* is, to borrow Loredana Polezzi's definition of travel writing, "a mutating form of discourse embedded in specific spatial and temporal realities" (2007: 12) and, like travel writing, Aboulela's book entails issues concerning

"contemporary theoretical areas […] most prominently, post-colonial studies" (Polezzi 2007: 13). Sudanese, Egyptian and English characters are engaged in travel and migration, repeatedly crossing geographical borders. They leave their own homes, transfer from one African territory to another, or from Africa to England. The arrival in Sudan and the departure from Egypt feed contrasting but intersecting forms of placement and displacement. Nabilah never becomes Sudanese in terms of language, manners, and habits; her material culture does, however, occupy a space in the new country, with her Egyptian space shifting with her to the cities of Sudan. On the other hand, Waheeba, who never becomes Egyptian, is able to translate her Sudanese culture into the Egyptian space that Nabilah creates for her own family within Sudan. The Sudanese woman *brutally* imposes infibulation on Nabilah's Egyptian-Sudanese daughter and thus forcefully establishes a *contact zone* between Sudanese and Egyptian identities.

Migration has indeed created numerous contact zones, to use Mary Louise Pratt's expression (1992). These are spaces where cultural translation in terms of gender, religious, social, and political issues has become a pervasive mechanism (Butt 2009). Butt points out that migratory movements involving Africans and Europeans have influenced African modes of narration and also highlights how these modalities represent translated spaces as transcultural contexts (Butt 2009). What emerges from Butt's studies on African women writers is a growing interest in the representation of African female experiences in postcolonial environments, understood as translated spaces, where each writer tries to reconstruct memories and habits through procedures of cultural translation. Aboulela, in particular, makes substantial use of cultural translation and shapes her novel as a "metatext of culture itself" through strategies of transportation and relocation of cultural items. Thus, the Arab culture in *Lyrics Alley* is "to be understood as a language, a cognitive system, a literature […], a material culture, a social system and legal framework, a history" (Tymoczko 1999: 20). In a move typical of postcolonial writing, the Anglo-African author "chooses which cultural elements to attempt to transpose to the receiving audience" and which "linguistic features related to the source culture (such as dialect or unfamiliar lexical items) can be highlighted as defamiliarized elements in the text" (Tymoczko 1999:

21). This happens on several occasions in *Lyrics Alley*, such as in the delightful representation of a Ramadan day:

> Badr walked the alleys of Wad Nubawi, heading towards the mosque. […] There were breaks between every four rakahs, when the men would drink water, renew their wudu or wander off. Most of them, though, sat in rows chanting *La illaha illa Allah*. Some men, in their white jellabiyas, stood swaying backwards and forwards; the words became more emphatic, the definite no, starting with no, and ending with the grandest word, Allah. […] After the taraweeh, the men ate their dinner. Large basins appeared and were placed on the sand. Ten to fifteen men squatted around each one, their arms stretched out, grabbing handfuls of kisra soaked in a watery stew. In minutes, the basins were wiped clean and dripping fingers were sucked and licked. (Aboulela 2010a: 133-4)

Aboulela focuses on specific lexis, on a selection of lexemes from which her Islamic culture emerges. In accordance with the principle of selectivity – common to travel-writing, postcolonial literature and translation –, the African novelist lays emphasis on a wide-ranging lexical domain, highlighting elements of the local "material culture (such as food, tools, garments), social structures (including customs and law), features of the natural world (weather conditions, plants, animals)" (Tymoczko 1999: 24-5). In her struggle to translate her "cultural metatext", Aboulela does not look for equivalents in the receptor culture and language, she does not use explanatory footnotes to explain unfamiliar meanings or concepts, nor does she adapt or modify source cultural elements for the benefit of the target reader. Instead, she transposes lexemes from Sudanese and Egyptian culture, inserts "words with lexical meaning" (Tymoczko 1999: 26) into Standard English, and renders Arab and African beliefs and myths explicit.

Aboulela also casts light on the African practice of female circumcision through Waheeba's primitive decision to inflict genital ritual surgery on Ferial. Mahmoud's Egyptian wife, Nabilah, labels the Sudan as the African country where infibulation is still barbarically carried out:

> While Nabilah was at the airport, Ferial was lured over to Waheeba's quarters. She was told that Zeinab was having a party and that there would be sweets and many girls her age to play with. Indeed, it *was* a celebration

of sorts for Zeinab, though it was kept low-key because Mahmoud had forbidden circumcision in his household ever since the procedure was declared illegal by the Anglo-Egyptian government. […] She injected them first with procaine and the instruments she used were sterilised. Afterwards, to prevent infection, she administered penicillin. […] The deed was done and the procedure was irreversible. The slice of knife, the tug and cutting away of flesh, and Ferial was someone else, one of *them*. She could never be like her mother again. Nabilah surrendered to the nightmare. It held her in a vice. Such unnecessary pain, such stupidity and malice. (Aboulela 2010a: 186-7)

Aboulela exploits the linguistic technique of explicitness to provide her "uninformed international audience" (Tymoczko 1999: 28) with information about Sudanese customs and history. Nabilah had once believed that female infibulation was merely an old wives' tale or that it belonged to a remote tradition. She was wrong: in "a modern Cairo hospital, the obstetrician […] [would be] disgusted to come across such barbarity, the kind of barbarity only found among peasants and the uneducated". (Aboulela 2010a: 188)

3. *Lyrics Alley* and its narrative space

The daughter of a Sudanese man and an Egyptian woman, Aboulela was born in Cairo in 1964 but grew up in Khartoum, which she left in 1987. In 1990, she moved to Scotland with her family, where she worked at Aberdeen College and Aberdeen University. Writing has been her principal activity since 1992. Aboulela's *The Translator*, her first novel, is about the identity conflict and culture shock to which an immigrant Muslim woman is subjected as a result of her shift from Sudanese Khartoum to Scottish Aberdeen; her second novel, *Minaret*, is also about the state of dislocation and disorientation experienced by a Sudanese girl in the big city, London. Both female protagonists are immigrant subjects contemplating their return home. *Lyrics Alley* differs from the first two works in that characters migrate from one place to another, from one country to another, their transitory movements also taking place in their imagination and rendering their travels a somewhat fluid experience. Pictures of Africa under the British live on in the minds of the protagonists; physical descriptions emerge from distant memories as well as material experiences. The travel context is reinforced through

the language of the five senses: the depiction of geographical places (Khartoum, Umdurman, Cairo, London) and the account of sensations related to them (smells, tastes, sounds). The African territories are the hot countries of Egypt and Sudan: a metropolitan, civilised, educated, and aristocratic Egypt, and an agricultural, uncivilised, and uncultivated Sudan. The five senses used as natural expedients for the portrayal of a place highlight, as pointed out by Michael Cronin, the "complexity of human language and culture" (2000: 88) and represent a sort of "semiotic transcendence, where all the senses other than language are brought to bear on a travel experience" (Cronin 2000: 89). A third territory which appears in the text is London, viewed as the site of culture and education, progress and business, yet rather insignificant in terms of nature, landscape, myth and tradition.

Lyrics Alley ends with the presage of a future Sudanese independence: "the signing of the Self Government Agreement between Britain, Egypt and Sudan" (Aboulela 2010a: 264) is carried out and Sudan seems to be ready to express "its African identity and [to assert] itself as simple and rich, Negro and vibrant, flowing and deep" (Aboulela 2010a: 294). This historical framework underpins *Lyrics Alley* and encourages the writer to go back to Khartoum after seventeen years of absence, trying to imagine the pre-independence Sudan of her father's youth. The Egyptian-Sudanese writer's principal source of narrative inspiration is, however, the unforeseeable accident which befalls Hassan Awad Aboulela and which becomes the metaphor for 1950s Sudan. Aboulela's uncle, a determined teenager from Sudanese high society, with a world of privilege lying before him, dives into the sea, near Alexandria, hits a rock below the water, and breaks his neck.

In the novel, characters travel from Sudan to Egypt – and in particular to Alexandria. Travel is presented as a nostalgic move first from Sudan to Egypt and then on to England. It brings about forms of cultural and linguistic shock, due to cultural diversity, which is not just a question of distant geographies, but also applies to the two African locations during the period of British dominion. The travel experience is presented through the telling of stories about people from Sudan and Egypt; the material culture of each place is described from the perspective of numerous travellers who know those locations and who, through a process of cultural translation,

provide the reader with an impression of the local climate, customs, languages and dialects, beliefs, and ancient myths. In *Lyrics Alley,* cultural translation becomes what Susan Bassnett has called "an exciting journey" (1997: 11) for the reader. The novel, like much travel writing, is "about wanting to cross boundaries and enter into new territory" (Bassnett 1997: 11) and evokes the transformation of Sudan from a territory under British rule to an independent country, a Sudan which is also "slowly but surely, becoming Islamic" (Aboulela 2010a: 296). The novel's geographical setting thus leaves the British-based terrain of Aboulela's earlier works and transports us to her African homelands, featuring characters who, like herself, are half-Egyptian, half-Sudanese, and negotiate the tensions between these two identities. Duality and double-sidedness reflect the novelist's own personal life and, in particular, her childhood, a period in which Aboulela experienced a mixed cultural and linguistic education. Although her home was in Khartoum, culturally she was Egyptian and this dual aspect provided her with a rich and creative perception of places, cultures and languages. She states:

> When I was growing up, we spoke Egyptian, we ate Egyptian food, we had other Egyptian friends. It was my father's preference. I think he saw marrying an Egyptian as being liberating from the customs of his days. He had left Umdurman to go to Victoria College in Egypt and then Trinity College, Dublin. A lot of his friends married English and Irish ladies. I think marrying an Egyptian was a compromise. My mum and dad were speaking all the time about 'in Sudan we do this' and 'in Egypt we do that' so I was very aware of cultural differences. (Aboulela 2010b)

The writer's twin sets of cultural and linguistic baggage (Arab and British) and her desire for national individuality are also associated with Sudan's search for national identity, which feeds the souls of Sudanese people. Aboulela's search for freedom from a colonial past mirrors Sudan's expectations for national independence, which, in *Lyrics Alley*, is not presented as a remote hope but as a real possibility.

Sudan and Egypt are the two antagonistic *women* – represented by Waheeba and Nabilah respectively – in Aboulela's narrative space. The countries take on the role of insider and outsider travellers who transport the reader across Sudanese and Egyptian routes whilst depicting the two places in antithetical terms: civilised/primitive,

sophisticated/barbaric, metropolitan/rural, emancipated/restricted, and educated/uncultivated. The conflictual relationship between the civilised Nabilah and the primitive Waheeba materialises through the geographical and climatic differences between Sudan and Egypt (sultry Sudan/fresh Egypt). The Sudanese heat makes breathing impossible, the climate is claustrophobic, and Khartoum summers are suffocating with "unbearable stillness", full of "dust clouds, reddish brown formations gathering on the horizon", menacing and crushing "the city in an embrace of grit and sand", with howling and blowing winds "churning dust and ripping loose garbage and bushes" and forming "ripples of sand on the ground, swirls and patterns as if the desert had visited and left its tracks" (Aboulela 2010a: 123). The "very air and texture of Sudan itself" makes the African location a "place where reality [is] slippery and fantasy could take over the mind, a place of wayward spirituality, a place where the impossible and the romantic [pulse] within reach. A place where intangible, inhuman forces still [prevail], not yet tamed and restrained by the rules of religion and men" (Aboulela 2010a: 60-1). Egypt is quite the opposite: the Alexandrian lifestyle, which emerges through Soraya's travels and the use of sensory perception, is one of ecstatic joy, where people wake up late hearing the sound of the waves and smelling breakfast, where they can observe the lively social scene of the Corniche, and where lovers are free to walk arm in arm, something which is forbidden in Sudan. Alexandria, as an international setting, is what Nabilah, who is tired of her "African adventure" (Aboulela 2010a: 84), misses. Yet the Sudanese Soraya also admires Egypt, its customs and landscapes. When she is not able to travel with her sister Fatma and with Nur, she does it in her imagination or she moves from home to home, which makes of her a *nomad* within her own family, her own town, and her own country. Soraya adores the art of travelling itself: "Geography was her favourite subject. She gazed at maps and dreamt of the freshness and adventure of new cities. She loved travelling to Egypt, and how she didn't have to wear a tobe in Cairo. She wore modern dresses and skirts [...]" (Aboulela 2010a: 4).

Waheeba and Nabilah represent two contrasting geographies, full of smells and tastes. Waheeba symbolises traditional Sudan, believes in the evil eye, spends her time in her Sudanese *hoash* and has a "primitive" appearance; Nabilah, with her sophisticated

Egyptian good looks, symbolises metropolitan Egypt and the urbane westernised future of Sudan. The reader is faced by a dual Africa: two locations, geographically belonging to the same continent but enormously distant in terms of culture, language, elegance, and landscape. Waheeba "was more African in features than her husband, and on each side of her cheeks ran three tribal scars, like cracks on a dry riverbed, which made her face look broader and more open" (Aboulela 2010a: 16-7). Waheeba's physicality goes beyond traditional depictions of the foreign in travel writing; her physical appearance also represents a model of cultural translation, in which a primitive woman penetrates the narrative texture through a foreign language. She has no makeup on her face, her hair is fashioned in "traditional tight braids close to the head", and she is depicted as having a "soft round stomach", "hennaed braids", "large, plump hands" (Aboulela 2010a: 31-2).

Waheeba never travels, and she cannot accept Nur's constant movement: "Why does he have to travel so far away to study? Why couldn't he attend Comboni College?" (Aboulela 2010a: 45). Waheeba and Mahmoud's difference of opinion over British education testifies to a compromise between Sudan and England in matters of education, health and business. Politically and historically, the British always inhabit the scenes of *Lyrics Alley*: "Because of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, Sudan was not technically part of the British Empire. The Foreign Office, rather than the Colonial Office, ruled it, which resulted in a more graceful colonial experience and the British officials Mahmoud came into contact with were refined and educated, well-travelled and diplomatic" (Aboulela 2010a: 49). Mahmoud does business with the British. He sells his cotton to an "Oxford graduate with solid credentials", Mr Nigel Harrison. This man is tremendously attracted to Sudan, which he refers to as a "fascinating land" with "great potential" (Aboulela 2010a: 50). Mr Harrison views Sudan in two ways: he has the attitude of the British coloniser, whose objective is to exploit the land's natural resources, and also those of the enthusiastic traveller, who is eager to contemplate an unordinary foreign landscape and experience an exotic climate and culture. Aboulela's resistance to assimilation, which parallels what Tejaswini Niranjana defines as "translation as disruption" in a postcolonial context (1992, 2002), does not necessarily imply a denigration of the British system. Instead, the

novelist practices what Haroldo de Campos calls "cannibalism" (qtd. in Vieira 1999), a process which involves devouring the enemy's positive aspects in order to metabolise its virtues. There are several examples of this strategy in the text: Nur attends the Victoria College in Alexandria, and he speaks and writes excellent English; Soraya dreams of living in big cities and reading classic literature; Mahmoud is ill and British doctors intervene; Nur can no longer move his legs and his father takes him to London. The cannibalistic metaphor thus becomes an instrument which is used not in the sense of negating the Other (the British culture and language), but in the sense of absorbing, reproducing and strengthening it with African qualities. The Sudanese Mahmoud, Nur, and Soraya metaphorically 'devour' and exploit the British health service, the English language, and the British educational system. Cannibalism somehow reduces the tension between the Sudanese colonised (Mahmoud and his family) and the British colonisers (Mr Nigel Harrison, Nur's teachers, the British doctors), and the cannibalistic interpretation of the relationship between colonisers and colonised introduces a new reading of colonialism itself and challenges the power hierarchies between Sudanese and British people. In this sense, *Lyrics Alley* expresses a continuous process of identity reconstruction involving both the colonised and the coloniser and depicts a Sudan transformed into a space of hybridisation, where identities and subjectivities are moulded and strive to find an intercultural dialogue. The strategic expedient which allows Aboulela to avoid assimilating her text into the hegemony of the host language is a frequent jettisoning of the idea of compensating in any way for the reader's lack of understanding of the original culture, words, and facts. Aboulela seeks to communicate to her readers – either African or English – "the same image, the same impression" that she herself gained of her culture.

The constant and dominant clash is not, however, between Sudan and the British Empire but, rather, between Sudan and Egypt, Sudanese and Egyptian women, both proud and jealous of their origins, dialects, and traditions. The tension between Sudan and Egypt is revealed, for instance, through the detailed description of Waheeba and Nabilah's *hoash*. Waheeba's Sudanese *hoash* is portrayed as follows:

The wide, open-air hoash was lined with beds, little stools and tables. It was a massive kitchen, sitting room and bedroom in which women, servants and children cooked, slept, ate and socialised. […] Large round trays were laid out, ready to be filled and sent to the men. The delicious smell of sausage mixed with the tart smell of fried fish [...] little dishes of pickles, white cheese, boiled eggs, and red chilli mixed with lemon juice, salt and cumin. (Aboulela 2010a: 16-7)

Nabilah, on the other hand, does not own a proper Sudanese *hoash*, as shown in the passage below:

Instead of a hoash, there was a shaded terrace with a wicker table and chairs where, in winter, she could sit and enjoy her afternoon tea […]. Instead of the traditional beds lining the four walls of the sitting room, she had spacious armchairs, a settee, and, in pride of place, her gramophone. It was a proper room, a room to be proud of. Guests reclining and sitting on beds, angharaibs made of rope being the only furniture in a room, the intimacy and privacy of a bed laid out for public eyes and use – was something that particularly infuriated her. It was, she believed, a sign of primitiveness, proof that the Sudanese had a long way to go. Meals too, in Nabilah's quarters, were served in the dining room, around a proper dining table, with knives, forks and serviettes, not clusters of people gathering with extended fingers around a large round tray, while sitting on those very same beds she had so many objections to. (Aboulela 2010a: 24-5)

Sudan is a distant place like "the bottom of the sea, an exotic wilderness, soporific and away from the momentum of history", "amazing but constricting, threatening" (Aboulela 2010a: 24). Sudan is the "periphery", "a province of Egypt"; Cairo is a civilised place, a "metropolitan centre" (Aboulela 2010a: 37-8). The conflictual relationship between African spaces never abates in the text and dominates the parallel tension between Sudan and England. The tension between Egypt and Sudan, which is also fuelled by the British forces, finds a compromise in Soraya and Nur. Soraya embodies her Sudanese origins, but also has a powerful desire for cultural emancipation, which she finds in the Egyptian style of life; on the other hand, Nur's lyric talent – which shapes the novel's trajectory – is a *trait d'union*, a cultural negotiation between a Sudanese existence, essentially primitive and exotic, and a European-Egyptian one, artistically sensitive and elegant, cultivated and civilised. Unfortunately, though, Nur's first physical contact

with London occurs on the occasion of his fatal accident. He moves from Alexandria to a London hospital:

> London is an interrupted dream. […] Englishmen mill around his stretcher with coarse accents and rough hands, doing heavy manual work. They are not like the English he is used to seeing, his teachers at Victoria and his father's friends. They unload him from the ship like they unload the luggage. […] London is not unknown to Nur, even though this is his first visit. […] even though it is 1951, what Nur sees is war-damaged, dented buildings, glimpses of a ruin waiting to be rebuilt. The city is in rehabilitation, poised between peace and construction, between austerity and boom, between rationing and plenty. (Aboulela 2010a: 115)

Nur observes London through painful eyes, deprived of the joy which might have stemmed from walking English streets on his own two feet. Nabilah, on the contrary, sees London as "charming", "atmospheric", "solid and looking forward". London makes of her and Mahmoud a real couple, "a 'Mr and Mrs' as was the English expression" (Aboulela 2010a: 177). Travel is the reason for Nur's mental and physical suffering, but travel is also what turns him into a poet. Travel mixes his "Sudanese colloquial and classic Arabic, a fusion of formal language and common everyday words" (Aboulela 2010a: 221). Travel, which becomes the motivation for Nur's poetry – what gives him light –, is the metaphor for his existence: "*Travel caused my tribulations* […] *In you Egypt, are the causes of my injury. And in Sudan my burden and solace*" (Aboulela 2010a: 304, emphasis in the original).

4. Conclusions

Lyrics Alley is a translated narrative space, where characters lead a nomadic existence within African states. Nomadic movement from familiar to unfamiliar environments locates the text within a postcolonial framework, where travel and cultural translation walk along intersecting routes. In *Across the Line*s, Michael Cronin describes translation itself as a nomadic experience, as a form of peregrination similar to the one involving female and male characters in *Lyrics Alley*. In Cronin's terms, "the translating agent like the traveller straddles the borderline between two cultures" (2000: 2). Similarly, in Aboulela's narrative characters travel across

fluctuating territories, translate their language and culture into the space which they temporarily occupy and also become mediators between local languages and cultures. That mediation renders the host country (Sudan) a place where antithetical people can cohabit, albeit in contradictory and challenging terms.

The characters' physical and imaginary travels across Sudan, Egypt and, briefly, to England evoke a process of deconstruction and reconstruction achieved by means of a translating mechanism. This makes travel and translation interrelated processes: translation can be seen as a form of travel and vice versa (Polezzi 2001), and all literature which is concerned with travel implies mechanisms of translation. Here immigrant characters are translators "insofar as they must make sense of the foreign to survive" (Lahiri 2002: 119). Aboulela's project of looking for a language that can allow diverse idioms and cultures to communicate, "as the traveller moves continents" (Cooper 2006: 340), testifies to the link between translation and travel within the context of *Lyrics Alley*. In the novel, Nabilah, Soraya, Nur, and Mahmoud Abuzeid are all *migrant* travellers and translators. As such, they are the "iconic image of contemporary modes of mobility" and, as both travellers and translators, they "relay the new through the known, the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar" (Polezzi 2006: 171).

Lyrics Alley – an *African* text written in *English* – displays the stylistic, methodological, and theoretical apparatus which is employed in the literatures of migration, where characters live in-between two worlds and make use of English as well as of cultural translation (in its non-textual and non-linguistic function) in order to give voice to postmodern, postcolonial subjectivities (Kràl 2009). In *Lyrics Alley*, translation does not control one source language and culture to the detriment of another (Shuttleworth and Cowie 1997), but is rather a metaphorical expedient, the product of human migration and a cultural ritual springing from language relocation, which still maintains cultural specificity (Maria Rosa Bollettieri and Elena Di Giovanni 2009) through a process of negotiation between African identities and African, as well as European, subjectivities. These subjectivities do not blend together, however. Rather, they fulfil diverse and distinct functions.

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