


Chapter 7

Crossing the Borders, Rewriting Hegemonies: Reclaiming Narrative Space in Arab Women's Literature in Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the multiple strategies employed to reclaim narrative space in contemporary Arab women's trans-border narratives in the diaspora. It explores how these dissonant narratives challenge forces that have historically silenced the Oriental Arab feminine, denied her access to signifying systems, and constrained both her individual agency and corporeal autonomy. Focusing on Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, this chapter investigates how cross-border mobility, both literal and metaphorical, dismantles essentialist constructions of gender, identity, and movement. It argues that the female protagonists, by navigating cultural and geographical boundaries, actively resist reductive portrayals and reclaim control over their individual identities and bodies. This study posits that mobility serves as a counter-hegemonic tool, subverting dominant discourses and reshaping subjectivity beyond both Western Orientalist representations and Arab hetero-patriarchal frameworks.*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-2592-7.ch007

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Arab women's diasporic literature has emerged as a critical postcolonial space for renegotiating identity, subverting dominant narratives, and reclaiming agency through storytelling. Positioned at the crossroads of history, geography, and language, Arab women writers in diaspora negotiate and unsettle both Western hegemonic representations and patriarchal orthodoxies rooted within their own socio-cultural frameworks. This paper explores how Aboulela's (1999) *The Translator* and Faqir's (2007) *My Name is Salma* navigate these intersecting forms of subjugation, colonial, national, and gendered, through narratives of exile, migration, and dislocation. Both texts function as acts of narrative resistance, articulating counter-discourses that challenge dominant narratives of orientalism and Arab patriarchy. By foregrounding female voices historically marginalized in both Western and Arab literary imaginaries, these novels construct a discursive space wherein authors and protagonists alike reclaim the right to speak, to belong, and to redefine identity across cultural, national, and epistemological borders.

This study closely examines how these cross-border narratives deconstruct heteronormative and Orientalist representations of mobility, discursive frameworks that have historically immobilized Arab women, portraying them as static, domesticated, and devoid of corporeal or political agency. Aboulela (1999) and Faqir (2007) deploy cross-border mobility not simply as a plot device, but as a subversive literary strategy that enables the emergence of contingent, relational, and fluid articulations of Arab female subjectivities. Their protagonists' movements across geopolitical and symbolic boundaries unsettle the essentialized image of the Arab woman as a fixed and monolithic subject. Instead, they foreground dynamic and evolving identities shaped by displacement, hybridity, and the pursuit of self-authorship. Mobility, in this context, becomes a site of epistemic rupture, a means to dismantle the logocentric binaries that underpin both colonial and patriarchal discourses. The border-crossing subjectivities forged in these texts thus challenge the authority of native and Western phallogentrism alike.

Structurally, the paper is divided into two sections. The first section interrogates how Leila Aboulela's (1999) *The Translator* constructs the figure of Sammar, a pious, racialized Sudanese Muslim woman, as a translational subject, both literally and metaphorically. It explores how Sammar's positionality challenges dominant narratives of subaltern femininity. By so doing, the analysis highlights how the novel reclaims translation as a mode of feminist counter-discourse, unsettling binary oppositions between a powerful, rational, masculinized West and a passive, feminized East. It argues that Aboulela (1999) foregrounds alternative imaginaries of power, identity, and belonging, imaginaries rooted in affect, spirituality, and the

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