The Entrepreneurial Translator: Accelerated Fluency and Neoliberal Self-Optimization in Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi's the Centre

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Siddiqi's *The Centre* (2023) as a sharp literary anatomy of neoliberal self-optimization. Existing discussions of the novel have understandably emphasized language politics, cultural appropriation, and the ethics of translation; however, the novel also offers a sustained critique of achievement culture, accelerated learning, and the entrepreneurial imperative to convert every aptitude into capital. Bringing together Michel Foucault's account of human capital, Nikolas Rose's work on advanced liberal subject formation, Ulrich Bröckling's theorization of the entrepreneurial self, and Byung-Chul Han's analyses of burnout and psychopolitics, we argue that Siddiqi's speculative institution does not merely teach languages: it manufactures competitive subjects by compressing time, disciplining affect, and transforming intimacy into extractive infrastructure. Through close reading of Anisa Ellahi's desire to become a "real" translator, the article shows how the novel links literary aspiration to market legibility, bodily absorption, and the violent incorporation of others' lives. *The Centre* ultimately reveals that under neoliberal reason, self-making appears voluntary and empowering even when it is organized through exhaustion, hierarchy, and cannibal extraction.

Keywords: neoliberalism, translation, entrepreneurial self, governmentality, contemporary fiction

INTRODUCTION

One of the defining fantasies of the present is that the self can be sped up. Languages can be learned in compressed bursts, expertise can be acquired through apps, attention can be gamified, and life itself can be reorganized as a sequence of measurable upgrades. The contemporary subject is repeatedly told that delay is waste, that slowness is failure, and that accomplishment belongs to the one who can most efficiently convert desire into skill, skill into visibility, and visibility into value. Educational platforms, self-tracking technologies, and productivity cultures do not simply promise improvement; they promise an intensified relation to the self in which every latent possibility must be activated, cultivated, and monetized. Contemporary fiction has increasingly turned toward these imperatives, registering how neoliberalism migrates from markets into feeling, temporality, aspiration, and embodiment (Berlant, 2011; Brown, 2015; Davies, 2014; Fisher, 2009; Shonkwiler, 2017). Yet the specifically linguistic and literary forms of self-optimization have received less sustained attention.

Siddiqi's *The Centre* is especially valuable in this regard because it moves the critique of neoliberalism into the sphere of translation, multilingualism, and literary ambition. Its protagonist, Anisa Ellahi, is not a banker, consultant, or startup founder. She is a subtitler, a reader, an aspirant translator, and a woman shaped by migration, postcolonial hierarchy, and aesthetic longing.

What makes *The Centre* so compelling is that it does not treat this aspiration as merely personal vanity. Instead, it places Anisa's longing inside a highly contemporary apparatus of optimization. The Centre itself is an elite

institution that promises instant fluency, but its real function is broader and darker: it transforms language learning into a regime of accelerated becoming. In this sense, the novel is not only about appropriation in a postcolonial frame, though it certainly remains about that. It is also about the neoliberal demand that the subject continuously re-engineer herself, even in the domain of art, language, and intimacy.

This article argues that *The Centre* should be understood as a speculative critique of neoliberal self-optimization in which translation becomes a privileged site for observing how contemporary subjectivity is governed. It proceeds from three related claims. First, the novel shows that literary aspiration is increasingly shaped by entrepreneurial reason: Anisa does not merely want to translate; she wants to become legible as a valuable subject within a hierarchy of prestige. Second, Siddiqi gives this process a distinctly embodied form. The costs of optimization are not abstract or symbolic; they are temporal, affective, digestive, and somatic. Third, the novel demonstrates that accelerated self-fashioning depends on forms of extraction that are disavowed by the rhetoric of consent, opportunity, and improvement. The optimized self is not self-generated. It is assembled from appropriated labors, voices, memories, and bodies.

These claims matter for several reasons. At the level of literary criticism, they extend scholarship on neoliberal fiction beyond finance, precarity, and workplace flexibilization toward the domain of cognitive-cultural labor. At the level of translation studies, they challenge celebratory narratives about multilingualism by asking how language becomes capital, credential, and social differentiation. At the level of theory, they help specify what the achievement subject looks like when filtered through race, gender, migration, and the unequal cultural valuation of languages. The questions that organize this reading are therefore not only what the Centre does, but what kind of subject it presupposes and produces. How does the novel turn fluency into a temporal technology of acceleration? How are literary ambition and postcolonial inadequacy converted into entrepreneurial drive? And how does the novel expose the violence that underwrites seemingly voluntary projects of self-improvement?

Our central argument is that Siddiqi's novel imagines the "entrepreneurial translator" as a distinctly contemporary figure: a subject who treats language not primarily as relation, inheritance, or ethical encounter, but as a scarce asset through which legitimacy, authority, and future value can be secured. Anisa's desire for greatness is not mocked by the novel; it is rendered painfully intelligible.

The first body of scholarship most relevant to this article concerns neoliberalism as a mode of subject formation. Foucault's lectures on biopolitics remain foundational because they trace how *homo oeconomicus* is reimagined under neoliberalism not merely as an exchanger in the marketplace but as human capital to be enhanced, managed, and continuously invested in (Foucault, 2008). Subsequent theorists have extended this insight by showing that neoliberalism does not operate primarily through external prohibition; rather, it works by installing competition, responsibilization, and self-monitoring within the subject herself (Brown, 2015; Dardot & Laval, 2014; Harvey, 2005; Ong, 2006; Rose, 1999). Jason Read (2009) clarifies that neoliberalism produces a specific subjectivity structured by investment in one's own capacities, while Lemke (2001, 2019) demonstrates how governmentality links freedom, conduct, and self-relation. This line of thought is especially valuable for reading *The Centre*, because Siddiqi's novel is less interested in overt domination than in the subtle internalization of aspiration, competition, and self-discipline.

A second group of critics has emphasized the affective and psychological life of neoliberalism. Berlant (2011) shows how attachments to the good life persist even when those attachments are structurally cruel. Illouz (2007) tracks the intertwining of feeling and capitalist rationality, while Ahmed (2010) examines how happiness functions as a regulatory orientation, directing subjects toward socially approved forms of flourishing. Gill and Orgad (2018), Banet-Weiser (2018), Rottenberg (2018), and McRobbie (2016) have been particularly important in revealing the gendered terms on which resilience, confidence, and self-branding are demanded. The novel's emotional texture—envy, deflation, hunger, admiration, dissatisfaction—belongs to what Ngai (2005) calls the minor and ugly feelings generated by blocked agency, but it also belongs to the neoliberal injunction to keep improving.

Byung-Chul Han and Ulrich Bröckling sharpen this discussion in ways especially useful for Siddiqi's novel. Han's account of the burnout society argues that contemporary power works through positivity, achievement, and self-exploitation rather than overt repression (Han, 2015a, 2017). The subject imagines herself free precisely

when she is most thoroughly compelled to perform, optimize, and remain available. Bröckling (2016), similarly, argues that the entrepreneurial self is never complete; it is a permanent project of activation, comparison, and revision. These frameworks help explain why achievement in *The Centre* never settles into satisfaction. Fluency is not an end state but an upgrade that immediately produces new forms of desire and insufficiency. The novel's speculative premise makes visible what neoliberal discourse ordinarily conceals: the body required to sustain permanent self-enhancement.

The second scholarly conversation relevant here concerns neoliberalism and contemporary literary form. Critics such as Shonkwiler (2017), Dean (2009), Davies (2014), and Fisher (2009) have shown how neoliberal rationality restructures narrative conditions, social perception, and the terms on which realism itself can register abstraction. Although much of this work focuses on finance, mediation, and political economy, it has opened important questions about what kinds of literary forms are needed to represent distributed systems of power. Recent discussions of speculative fiction and contemporary dystopian writing similarly suggest that estrangement can render visible the normalized violences of everyday capitalism (Ma, 2018; Ogawa, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

The third body of scholarship concerns translation, multilingualism, and world literature. Translation studies has long insisted that translation is not neutral transfer but a socially and politically mediated practice (Bassnett, 2014; Berman, 1992; Cronin, 2003; Simon, 1996; Venuti, 2018). Spivak (1993) famously emphasizes the ethical intimacy required by translation, while Apter (2013) and Walkowitz (2015) complicate global literary circulation by foregrounding untranslatability, mobility, and the uneven status of languages. Casanova (2004) and Damrosch (2003) further demonstrate that literary value is distributed internationally through asymmetrical structures of recognition. These insights are indispensable for *The Centre*, a novel acutely aware that not all languages carry the same prestige and not all translators are positioned equally within world-literary circuits. Yet much of this scholarship, for understandable reasons, has focused on cultural mediation and textual politics rather than the neoliberalization of translation as labor and self-capitalization. Siddiqi's novel helps fill that gap. It asks what happens when translation becomes not only a mode of relation but a route to personal revaluation, social mobility, and competitive selfhood.

Taken together, these three conversations provide a strong basis for interpreting *The Centre*, but they also leave a specific opening. We still need a vocabulary for describing how literary aspiration, multilingual desire, and neoliberal optimization intersect in one figure. The novel supplies that figure in Anisa: a subject who does not merely translate texts, but seeks to translate herself into recognizability, prestige, and consequence. To theorize that formation, I propose the figure of the entrepreneurial translator.

From Governmentality to the Entrepreneurial Translator

The idea of the entrepreneurial translator emerges at the intersection of governance, achievement culture, and translation's unequal economies of value. Foucault's concept of human capital is the starting point because it names a shift in the way persons are governed: the individual is no longer addressed simply as a juridical subject or disciplined body, but as a portfolio of capacities whose future returns must be maximized (Foucault, 2008). Rose (1999, 2007) shows how this logic saturates everyday life by encouraging subjects to treat freedom itself as a project of self-management. Under advanced liberalism, one is governed by being asked to choose well, invest wisely, and transform oneself responsibly.

Bröckling's account of the entrepreneurial self extends this logic from formal economics into identity. The entrepreneurial subject is compelled to regard every attribute—creativity, affect, flexibility, sociability, multilingualism—as a resource that can be activated, improved, and strategically displayed (Bröckling, 2016). Importantly, entrepreneurial translator is never finished. It lives through permanent incompletion. The self must keep developing because the marketized horizon of potential always outstrips the present self. Han deepens the analysis by describing a regime in which coercion becomes internal and optimization becomes affectively charged. The subject exploits herself in the name of freedom, and exhaustion appears not as evidence of domination but as the price of self-realization (Han, 2015a, 2017).

These theorists illuminate *The Centre* because the novel stages language learning as exactly such a regime. Yet a translation-specific inflection is also necessary. Translation scholarship reminds us that languages are not equivalent units; they are unequally valued within colonial and world-literary hierarchies (Apter, 2013; Casanova, 2004; Venuti, 2018; Walkowitz, 2015). The entrepreneurial translator is therefore not just a self-improving multilingual subject. She is a subject who experiences language as differential capital. Some languages appear intimate but low-value, others prestigious and career-making; some forms of translation appear routine, feminized, or invisible, while others appear world-opening and consecratory.

The entrepreneurial translator, then, names a subject formation in which literary desire is organized by neoliberal metrics of upgrade, distinction, and self-investment. It describes a person who seeks not only to carry meaning across languages, but to move herself upward through language acquisition. This is not simply ambition in a timeless sense. It is ambition formatted by a world in which the self must become legible as talent, brand, and competitive asset. Siddiqi's novel shows that such formatting is never merely symbolic. It transforms time into urgency, intimacy into technique, and other people's stories into consumable infrastructure.

Inadequacy, distinction, and the fantasy of "real" translation

Anisa's problem at the beginning of the novel is not that she has no relation to language, literature, or work. On the contrary, she is already immersed in all three. She subtitles films, studies Urdu, reads seriously, and thinks intensely about translation's textures and decisions. What she lacks is not practice but consecration. When she complains that her work is "not real translation" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 6), she reveals the evaluative grid through which she sees herself. Subtitling is labor, but not the right kind of labor. It is useful, but not prestige-bearing. It sustains life, but it does not authorize identity.

This distinction is central to neoliberal subjectivity. What wounds Anisa is not simply underemployment. It is the inability to convert skill into legitimate selfhood. She is acutely aware of the gap between cultural participation and recognized authorship, between technical competence and aesthetic seriousness. Her reflection on having spent her whole life trying to leap the distance between "midwife and mother" only to fall "into the abyss" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 11) condenses the novel's account of this anguish. The metaphor is revealing. Anisa does not want only to assist meaning into the world; she wants proximity to origin, authority, and creation. The pain of mediation lies not in the work itself but in its unimportance within structures of literary value.

This feeling is intensified by the gendered and racialized comparison with Adam. The novel is highly alert to the fact that multilingual competence is not equally read across bodies. Adam's facility with languages appears as brilliance, while Anisa's multilingual life is tangled up with inheritance, obligation, and the devaluation of the mother tongue. The issue is not simply that Adam knows more languages. It is that his aptitude is more easily converted into enviable career capital. Siddiqi places Anisa's insecurity inside a postcolonial hierarchy where English cosmopolitanism and European languages remain disproportionately consecrated, while Urdu is marked by intimacy, nostalgia, and diminished institutional reward. Her desire to become a literary translator is thus not innocent; it is inseparable from a desire to occupy a more valuable position within world-literary circulation.

The novel complicates this desire rather than dismissing it. Anisa's reflections on translation are among the most intelligent parts of the book, and Siddiqi never suggests that her longing for literary work is shallow. Instead, the novel shows how aesthetic aspiration becomes captured by entrepreneurial logic. Anisa begins to experience herself as a stalled project. She has talent, but not market-legible distinction; taste, but not recognized authority; desire, but not transformation. The Centre promises to eliminate the slow, uncertain, uneven path through which artistic and linguistic capacities ordinarily develop. It offers direct conversion: time into fluency, fluency into status, status into selfhood.

Postcolonial language hierarchies and the market value of fluency

Anisa's inadequacy is never merely individual. It is structured by the unequal world of languages through which she moves. Siddiqi is especially attentive to the fact that multilingualism does not guarantee power; much depends on which language one possesses, how one acquired it, and under what institutional gaze that possession becomes intelligible. Anisa's relation to Urdu is tender, persistent, and anxious. She has "resolutely held on" to

it even while living largely in English, yet she worries that "Every day my Urdu gets worse" and that it has become "mixed up with the Hindi" (Siddiqi, 2023, pp. 6–7). The point is not simple linguistic attrition. It is the pressure of inhabiting a language as inheritance without being able to convert that inheritance into recognized literary authority.

This is why Anisa's dissatisfaction cannot be solved by the fact that she already knows Urdu. In the world imagined by the novel, heritage bilingualism does not automatically count as achievement. Urdu is a language of intimacy, memory, and cultural continuity, but it does not deliver the consecration she seeks. When she laments that "nobody reads in Urdu anymore" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 6), the statement is less a sociological claim than a diagnosis of perceived literary marginality. It expresses her sense that the route from Urdu to prestige is obstructed, uneven, and globally underwritten by unequal circuits of recognition.

The same dynamic shapes Anisa's relation to French. She does not simply say that her French is weak; she says it is "mediocre," "Not like French-person French" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 7). That formulation is extraordinarily revealing. It marks the difference between competence and native legitimacy, between usable knowledge and fully authorized embodiment. The entrepreneurial translator is haunted not just by deficiency but by authenticity. She must know, and know in the right way, under the sign of the right language-body alignment. Siddiqi radicalizes that challenge by showing how these fantasies are tied to prestige economies. Anisa does not only want to translate well. She wants to occupy the socially validated position from which good translation can be seen and believed.

German therefore enters the novel not as a neutral language choice but as a condensed fantasy of upward movement. It is "a real translator's language," the one that seems capable of opening access to serious literature, serious thought, and serious adulthood (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 45). Here the entrepreneurial logic of language learning becomes inseparable from a postcolonial hierarchy of literary capital. Anisa's desire for German is not simply admiration for European culture, nor merely internalized coloniality. It is an attempt to move within a field whose institutional rewards are unequally distributed. The novel does not deny the genuine intellectual attraction of German literature and philosophy, but it exposes how quickly that attraction is folded into a market grammar of enhancement. German promises not only more reading, but a more valuable self.

This tension also complicates standard oppositions between authenticity and appropriation. In *The Centre*, no language remains untouched by value extraction. Urdu can be preserved as familial or affective residue, French can become a measure of lack, and German can be pursued as a ladder. The Centre monetizes all of these relations by severing fluency from history and turning it into transferable capital. Siddiqi's novel is about a woman forced to navigate a multilingual landscape where some forms of linguistic intimacy do not count and some forms of foreignness count too much.

If the first wound of the entrepreneurial translator is inadequacy, the second is differential value. Anisa's aspiration emerges from the painful recognition that language is never just language. It is credential, accent, embodied legitimacy, and symbolic location. The Centre becomes seductive because it seems to bypass the slow historical labor through which linguistic authority is ordinarily conferred. It offers fluency without history, mastery without apprenticeship, and prestige without the humiliations of partiality.

Speed, discipline, and the Centre as optimization apparatus

The Centre first attracts Anisa because it offers an answer to blocked becoming. She imagines it as "the stepping stone" she needs to reach "the life" she really wants and, crucially, "to become a real translator" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 45). This formulation is important because it shows that the institution's seduction lies as much in identity as in skill. The Centre does not merely promise a new language; it promises a new version of the self. Its appeal is therefore inseparable from neoliberal temporal logic. If the self is a project, then slowness becomes intolerable. The Centre abolishes apprenticeship and replaces it with acceleration.

Anisa's choice of German demonstrates how thoroughly linguistic value has been internalized as a hierarchy of capital. She calls it "a real translator's language" and justifies the choice by invoking access, complexity, and cognitive enhancement: learning it, she says, will probably make her "smarter" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 45). In this

moment, language becomes not simply communicative medium or literary encounter, but a speculative investment in self-upgrade. German is desirable not only because of what can be read in it, but because of what it might do to the one who acquires it. The novel is acutely precise here: the fantasy of acceleration is always also a fantasy of qualitative transformation.

The Centre's intake procedures reveal the rationality behind this fantasy. When Tim explains that what the learner contributes is "Simply, presence," while also requiring that she be sufficiently "resilient enough to undergo the rigors of the process" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 62), the institution speaks the language of wellness, care, and self-development. Yet this discourse is already deeply governmental. Presence is recoded as input; resilience becomes a condition of extraction; health is assessed as capacity for intense absorption. The Centre governs not by threatening subjects, but by soliciting their consent to a highly managed environment.

The daily timetable intensifies this logic. Anisa discovers that her days are almost entirely structured around meditation, meals, and "language booth," with "about 80 percent of the timetable" reserved for the latter (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 74). The schedule resembles both monastic discipline and productivity architecture. Meditation is not freedom from performance here; it is part of an optimized system of receptivity. The learner's body is calibrated, stripped of distraction, and enclosed within a total environment designed to maximize absorption. The institution's isolation from the outside world is therefore not incidental. It is a necessary condition for temporal compression. Everyday life must be suspended so that accelerated fluency can appear miraculous.

Adam's warning that such learning makes one "forget who you even are" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 45) captures the double movement at work. On the one hand, identity destabilization appears as a risk. On the other, it is precisely what makes the process desirable. The old self—the inadequate, stalled, partially recognized self—must become permeable. Neoliberal optimization always promises continuity with one's "true" desires while requiring a break with one's present form. Siddiqi's novel exposes that paradox. The Centre can only deliver transformation because it first reprograms the learner.

Installed fluency, social revaluation, and the endless demand for more

The most brilliant formal move in *The Centre* is its refusal to romanticize fluency once acquired. When Anisa experiences the breakthrough, she describes it not in organic or relational terms but as "a little Google Translate in my head" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 94). Fluency here is figured as installed software. That simile strips the aura from language learning and places it squarely inside the logics of platform capitalism, automation, and frictionless functionality. What the Centre sells is not deep immersion in a culture, nor an ethical apprenticeship in another language's life-world, but instantaneous operability. Translation becomes infrastructural.

Yet Siddiqi does not stop at satirizing artificial fluency. She shows how this new competence is immediately converted into social revaluation. After Anisa's success, doors open. Invitations multiply. Her thoughts are now treated as "compelling" and "urgent," and she admits that "Being respected felt nice. Being taken seriously felt nice" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 108). This is one of the novel's most incisive moments because it reveals that what Anisa wanted was never only linguistic skill. She wanted a changed relation to public visibility and authority. Fluency delivers not simply access to texts but access to a different social gaze.

This shift is also behavioral. Anisa remarks that she became more punctual, more demanding, more willing to negotiate payment: "I would only speak for a fee. I would ask for transport and accommodation to be paid. I would negotiate my salary" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 110). These are classic traits of the entrepreneurial self: self-valuation, boundary enforcement, and strategic pricing of one's capacities. The novel does not present them as wholly false or undesirable. Indeed, some of them register a real increase in confidence and professional efficacy. Siddiqi's critique is subtler. She asks what it means that subjectivity must be reorganized in these terms in order to count. Anisa becomes more legible because she has learned to inhabit the grammar of self-capitalization.

At the same time, the novel insists that optimization cannot produce durable satisfaction. Anisa confesses that "the unbridled joy" she expected "at becoming a Great Translator" never arrived and that she began to wonder whether she was "an insatiable pit" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 110). Under conditions of perpetual optimization, success

does not terminate desire; it intensifies it. The subject cannot rest because the standard of value continually shifts. Fluency produces new insufficiencies. Recognition produces new comparisons. Achievement yields deflation.

This is why the Centre remains desirable even after disillusionment. Anisa misses the process itself. The institution's most powerful product is not a language but an addictive relation to transformation. The subject comes to crave the state of being remade. Siddiqi thereby captures something essential about neoliberal temporality: the promised future never stabilizes into arrival. It persists as a horizon of renewed enhancement. What is marketed as breakthrough is actually a feedback loop.

Cannibal human capital: extraction, consent, and the violence of incorporation

The novel's climactic revelation gives literal form to the logic it has been building all along. The learners have not simply listened to the Storytellers. They have ingested them. As Arjun bluntly explains, "You . . . ingested the Storytellers. Physically" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 215). Anisa's horror at this discovery is the novel's horror, but the disclosure should not be read as an arbitrary gothic twist. It is the materialization of the social truth the novel has been pursuing from the start: neoliberal self-making depends on appropriated others whose labor, affect, and personhood are metabolized into the success of the upwardly mobile subject.

Once the secret is named, the vocabulary of management shifts into the vocabulary of assimilation. "You assimilated him," Arjun says (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 215). The term is devastating because it compresses several histories at once. It evokes digestive incorporation, cultural absorption, colonial domination, and the erasure of alterity in the name of one's own enrichment. The entrepreneurial translator does not merely learn from others; she becomes able to perform because others have been converted into her infrastructure. What had previously appeared as elegant acceleration is revealed as violent transfer.

The Centre nonetheless attempts to neutralize this violence through the discourse of consent. Storytellers, the institution insists, choose this work; they do it to "live on." When Shiba says of Anna, "She's living on. Through you. In you" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 215), the argument is framed as a form of continuity, even care. This is entirely consistent with neoliberal rationality, which habitually recodes exploitation as voluntary opportunity. Choice here does not abolish violence; it legitimates it. The Storytellers' willingness becomes the moral alibi for a system built on the unequal conversion of lives into value for others.

This is also where the novel's critique of translation becomes most radical. Traditional accounts of translation often imagine an ethical relation to the foreign, one grounded in attentiveness, mediation, and responsibility (Berman, 1992; Spivak, 1993; Venuti, 2018). *The Centre* inverts that relation. The foreign is not encountered; it is consumed. Difference is not preserved in passage; it is processed into usable fluency. The novel therefore rewrites translation as a scene of neoliberal extraction in which the labor of relation is replaced by the fantasy of seamless incorporation. One no longer struggles with the opacity of another language. One digests the person who already inhabits it.

The final irony is that Anisa begins, after the shock, to imagine narrating her own story as future material for the system. She wonders what her story would be like if she were to tell it and decides that it should "simply be true" so that it might become "something nourishing" (Siddiqi, 2023, p. 225). This is not a full ethical refusal. It is evidence of how deeply the logic of the Centre has entered her imagination. Even critique becomes recyclable as content. Even horror becomes future nourishment. Siddiqi's ending is so disturbing because it refuses the fantasy of clean escape. Once entrepreneurial subjectivity is installed, the self learns to imagine its own consumability.

CONCLUSION

The Centre is a novel about language, but more precisely it is a novel about what happens when language is pulled fully into neoliberal reason. Siddiqi shows that translation, in such a world, is no longer merely an act of mediation between texts or cultures. It becomes an economy of self-valuation. Anisa's desire to become a "real translator" is inseparable from the wish to become more authoritative, more visible, more serious, more fully

alive within a hierarchy that differentially values languages, bodies, and forms of labor. In this sense, the novel offers one of the most incisive recent depictions of cognitive-cultural labor under neoliberalism.

By reading the novel through Foucault, Rose, Bröckling, and Han, this article has argued that the Centre operates as an optimization apparatus. It compresses time, disciplines bodies, engineers absorption, and installs in the learner a new relation to herself as asset. Siddiqi's major achievement lies in making these processes visceral. The subject of achievement is not abstractly "constructed"; she is scheduled, enclosed, recalibrated, rewarded, and finally fed. The novel's speculative horror reveals that self-enhancement under neoliberalism depends upon the conversion of others' stories and bodies into one's own competitive advantage.

At the same time, *The Centre* refuses simplification. It does not deny that recognition feels good, that confidence matters, or that professional legitimacy can alter a life. The novel understands why Anisa wants what she wants. Its critique is directed not at aspiration itself but at the social order that binds aspiration to acceleration, hierarchy, and extraction. That is why the figure of the entrepreneurial translator matters. She is not a villain or a dupe. She is a historically specific subject whose literary and linguistic longing has been formatted by the demand to optimize.

The implications of this reading extend beyond Siddiqi's novel. For literary studies, it suggests that contemporary fiction is increasingly concerned with the governance of cognition, affect, and selfhood rather than finance alone. For translation studies, it urges closer attention to the labor politics of multilingual prestige and to the unequal conversion of linguistic resources into cultural capital. For critical theory, it shows that the achievement subject must be specified through postcolonial and gendered coordinates. Anisa is not a generic neoliberal self. She is a Pakistani diasporic woman whose aspiration moves through inherited language, racialized comparison, and the global hierarchy of literary legitimacy.

In the end, *The Centre* reveals a devastating truth: the optimized self is never purely self-made. It is assembled from others. What neoliberalism presents as self-actualization is, in Siddiqi's speculative imagination, a cannibal structure of improvement. That is the novel's most unsettling insight and its most important contribution. It forces readers to confront how often contemporary success is nourished by lives rendered edible.

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