



Prioritizing Interpretation in Translation: A Postmodern Challenge to Canonized Meanings

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Abstract

This conceptual and theoretical article investigates the pivotal role of interpretation within the translation process. Drawing on postmodern translation theory and the insights of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Edward Said, this study analyzes textual dynamics through examples from Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child*, *The Sacred Night*, and *The Thousand and One Nights*. It argues that when the source text serves as the primary locus of knowledge, the translator-reader becomes acutely aware of their active role in meaning formation. In the absence of the author, the translator-reader assumes full responsibility for textual signification, no longer engaging with the source text through pre-established cultural preconceptions; rather, they construct dynamic meanings based on their specific, evolving interaction with textual signs. Accordingly, this paper prioritizes interpretation over fidelity to authorial intent or fixed textual meaning, positioning interpretation as a political act of resistance against dominant discourses and the commodification of "otherness" in Western publishing and translation practices. By framing translation through this postmodern lens, this study counters reductionist perspectives that oversimplify cultural complexities. In doing so, this approach challenges the canonization of meanings by dominant discourses and resists the imposition of ready-made viewpoints on dominated cultures.

1. Introduction

Adopting a reader-centered approach in translation is likely to challenge the canonization of meaning by dominant powers. When the reader is freed from authorial authority, they become independent in their own understanding of the text's significance. This empowerment grants the reading process an active role in deciphering textual structure, revealing how meaning-formation is primarily based on the text's internal and external connections. Therefore, significance cannot be attributed solely to the authorial presence; rather, the text is endowed with an open-ended structure capable of producing renewable and changeable versions of meaning. To this end, the reader's engagement not only challenges the author's ideology but also redirects the flow of codes, interrogating other hidden aspects of the text.

The primary objective of this paper is to draw attention to interpretation as an essential element in meaning formation, especially within translation. This perspective views the text as raw material with no single fixed essence which entrusts the reader with decoding its elements. Thus, translation is essentially a transformation of the translator's own viewpoint. The target reader, in turn, can form a new perspective that may differ from the translator's, thereby enriching the beauty and diversity of the source text.

The translator-reader's role as a participant in the construction of meaning does not entail complete freedom to impose external interpretations upon the source text. Instead,

interpretation must remain attentive to and informed by the textual features, cultural references, historical contexts, and internal complexities that shape the original work. Interpretations become reductive when they neglect these dimensions and replace the richness and complexity of the source text with predetermined cultural assumptions or dominant ideological viewpoints.

By bridging the abstract postmodern frameworks of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida with Said's postcolonial critique, this paper addresses a critical gap in existing research regarding how textual destabilization operationalizes political resistance. The study demonstrates that the translator-reader actively constructs meaning rather than passively transferring it. In doing so, it contributes to translation studies by reframing the translator not as a mere passive bridge between cultures, but as an active, politically engaged creator of meaning who resists dominant discourses and cultural commodification.

2. Theoretical Framework & Conceptual Mapping

This study combines postmodern literary theory and postcolonial critique to show that translation is an active, political act of interpretation rather than a simple word-for-word transfer. By challenging the traditional ideas that the original author holds absolute authority and that text has a fixed meaning, this framework presents the translator as an active reader who can resist dominant cultural narratives. To evaluate how meaning is built and challenged, the study rests on three primary theoretical pillars.

The Epistemological Shift: Death of the Author and Textual Openness

To move beyond traditional models centered on source-text fidelity, this study adopts the post-structuralist critiques of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. By applying Barthes's concept of the "death of the author," the framework shifts the focus of meaning from the creator to the receiver. Consequently, the translator is no longer a transparent conduit for the original author's voice; instead, they become an active reader who generates new meaning. Foucault's "author-function" further supports this shift by deconstructing the author as an institutional construct used to restrict interpretation. Together, these theories strip the author of absolute authority, transforming the source text into an open space that grants the translator the creative agency to actively reconstruct its meaning.

Deconstruction and the Fluidity of the Sign

The active generation of meaning by the translator-reader is structurally enabled by Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. Traditional translation models assume a stable relationship between the signifier (the word) and the signified (the concept), implying that a core "essential meaning" can be cleanly decoded and recoded into a target language. Derrida disrupts this assumption through *différance*, arguing that meaning is never fully present or fixed; rather, it is perpetually deferred and unstable. Because textual signs are inherently fluid and subject to continuous recontextualization, deconstruction provides the theoretical justification for treating translation as an ongoing process of rewriting. Ultimately, this framework allows the translator-reader to actively navigate the gaps and ambiguities of the text rather than uncover a singular, pre-existing truth.

Postcolonial Critique: Orientalism and Resistance

While post-structuralism establishes how textual meaning is fluid, Edward Said's critique of Orientalism provides the political and contextual framework for why this fluidity matters. Said (1978) demonstrates how Western discourses have historically constructed reductionist, essentialist, and stereotypical representations of the "East" to assert cultural and geopolitical dominance. In translation and publishing, this power dynamic often manifests as the commodification of "otherness," where non-Western texts are flattened or exoticized to fit Western expectations and market demands. Integrating Said's framework elevates translation from a neutral linguistic exercise to a political act of resistance. By operating within an open-ended textual space, the translator-reader gains the agency to consciously disrupt these ideologically motivated stereotypes. Rather than succumbing to dominant cultural discourses,

the translator can utilize textual fluidity to subvert Eurocentric representations and present marginalized cultures on their own complex terms.

3. Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual design utilizing postmodern translation critique and close reading methodologies. Moving away from traditional paradigms that view translation as a passive transfer of linguistic data, this research examines the active construction of meaning by the translator-reader. To investigate the interpretive agency of the translator-reader within this dynamic, the study addresses two central research questions:

1. To what extent can an independent translator-reader challenge pre-established stereotypes about certain cultures?
2. What is the significance of approaching the text as an open-ended space of meaning formation?

The study operationalizes the theoretical framework established in the Theoretical Framework section by applying postcolonial and deconstructive lenses directly to the selected literary corpus.

Corpus and Text Selection Criteria

A qualitative corpus was compiled using purposive sampling. Two literary works were selected based on their historical, structural, and thematic relevance to the research questions:

- ***The Thousand and One Nights***: Selected as a foundational, cross-cultural text. It possesses a long history of heavily canonized, reductionist Western translations that have historically perpetuated Eastern stereotypes. This text serves as the primary grounds for evaluating postcolonial resistance.
- **Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night***: Selected for their inherently postmodern narrative structures. These works explicitly deal with themes of unstable authorship and fragmented identity, serving as ideal models for exploring open-ended meaning formation.

Analytical Procedure

This study does not track empirical, quantitative, or experimental translation data. Instead, it employs a qualitative, text-based close reading and discourse analysis strategy. The analytical procedure consists of three sequential phases:

- **Identification of Textual Signs**: Isolating specific narrative passages within the corpus where cultural representation is highly dependent on reader interpretation.
- **Deconstructive Reading**: Analyzing how varying translation perspectives either reveal, resist, or succumb to dominant cultural canonization and ready-made viewpoints.
- **Comparative Critique**: Evaluating how the structural absence of an absolute authorial voice in both source texts forces the translator-reader to actively construct culture rather than passively decode it.

4. Results and Discussion

Challenging Canonization: The Social and Cultural Evolution of Meaning

Translation is an essential phase in reinforcing communication and mutual understanding among cultures. It is impossible for cultures to interact and benefit from each other unless the translation process frees itself from any ideological or political control. Political ideologies often prescribe rigid norms that compel translators to take sides, ensuring the cultural transposition of the source text reinforces the dominant power structure. The primary objective of this paper is to see translation as a contact zone where cultures can discover each other and interact on an equal basis. Translation is tasked with bringing human issues to light, for the main role of translators is to put the idea of global discussion into practice. Translation mirrors

the inner workings of a community, highlighting the social and cultural elements that define its automatic ways of thinking and acting. Therefore, translation should transcend ideological issues, focusing instead on paving the way and building bridges for mutual understanding.

The open-ended nature of textual structures encourages a proliferation of meaning and reinforces the reader's agency. In translation, reading is of pivotal importance, as it relies on interpretation to decipher the codes that constitute textual significance. Linguistic codes remain inert until they are read; the reading process decodes these structures to produce a specific interpretation, which may vary significantly between readers. In this sense, interpretation grants a text immortality; by triggering a continuous expansion of meaning, it ensures that no textual structure is bound to a single, unchanging essence.

Postmodern fiction rejects the canonization of meaning, asserting that it is impossible for a text to signify independently of its social, political, or cultural circumstances. Yet, it remains open to new versions of meaning evolving from the reader's contact with it. Language is often a reflection of its time. A joke written a century ago might fail to resonate today, not because the words changed, but because the cultural context that gave them meaning has shifted. Postmodern translation, therefore, must foreground intertextuality, acknowledging that ideas evolve within a vast web of interconnected textual structures rather than in isolation. Thus, every text carries within itself the seeds of the future production of another text. In this regard, translation perpetuates the interrelatedness that marks the production of literary texts; it is far more than a mere medium. As Jorge Luis Borges argued, "to translate is to produce literature, just as the writing of one's own work is—and it is more difficult, rarer. In the end all literature is translation" (as cited in Kristal, 2002, p. 32). Translation is never a mere transformation of content; rather, it is an interpretive act that embodies the translator's unique viewpoint, a perspective shaped by their mastery of the language and their perception of how discourse functions within the source culture.

Language is fundamental to the realm of interpretation, providing the reader with the tools necessary to decipher the inner structures that constitute a text's significance. Consequently, the translator's role transcends mere mediation; translation is an active process of constructing and reconstructing meaning. Interpretation lies at the heart of postmodern translation, as the source text does not maintain a singular meaning; instead, it is rich, debatable, and characterized by an open-ended structure. This structure interacts with the reader, whose engagement with the text triggers a unique vision of its significance.

The expectation that a textual structure possesses an inherent, stable meaning implies a pre-existing essence visible from only a single perspective. Thus, cultural domination emerges from this reductionist view because dominant forces maintain supremacy by imposing a 'ready-made' interpretation, thereby dictating a singular way of conceiving both the source text and its culture. The importance of translation lies in its ability to preserve the local nuances of the source text while mediating the cultural atmosphere of its origin. This process invites the reader into a transformative experience, encouraging them to find the points in common while valorizing cultural difference. Derrida (2007) argued that translation enhances the survival of languages: "Survival gives a surplus of life, more than a surviving. The work does not simply live longer, it lives more and better, beyond its author's means" (p. 203). As demonstrated above, Derrida views translation as a mirror through which the interaction of languages becomes visible. Decoding a textual structure thus necessitates a deciphering of the underlying linguistic systems. Drawing on this perspective, translation must prioritize weaving links between languages. Therefore, this role revives linguistic systems, enabling them to expand their capacity for describing, encoding, and transmitting meaning.

Postmodern translation calls for a non-essentialist approach that emphasizes the translator's role in reproducing the text. This approach enables the target reader to construct their own outlook, free from the constraints of ideological authority. Since it rejects the idea of translation as a mechanical transformation, the non-essentialist approach relies on the translator's unique reading mechanisms to articulate a specific perspective of the text's significance. The

translator's constructed viewpoint may align with or diverge from that of the original author; however, its primary contribution lies in fostering diversity and dissipating ideological control. As Rosemary Arrojo (2018) suggests, the translator's role is more than just delivering a message; by actively 'producing' meaning, they safeguard the text's richness and variety. Crucially, the translator intervenes to highlight the local traits of the source culture without sensationalizing the text or representing the 'Other' as inherently abnormal or exotic.

Every cultural atmosphere is the product of specific historical, ecological, and political conditions. In this regard, approaching a text requires accounting for these conditions to contextualize its transformation and highlight its true cultural components. For instance, certain translations of the life story of Zahra in *The Sand Child* (Ben Jelloun, 1985/1987) and *The Sacred Night* (Ben Jelloun, 1987/1989) portray Moroccan women as merely submissive victims of male persecution. Such translations, which reduce the 'Other' to an uncivilized caricature, lead target readers to form distorted global views. Crucially, these translations are far from innocent; they are often ideologically and politically oriented to serve specific external agendas. In the original French, Ben Jelloun uses a surreal fragmented narrative to explore the character's internal identity crisis. Poręba (2023) argues that this narrative style protects the protagonist's life story from being categorized or tamed by hegemonic narratives. However, some English versions and reviews remove that artistic nuance. Instead of treating it as a surreal story about gender, they frame it as a literal "report" on how brutal Arab society is. This shifts the focus from a complex person to a flat stereotype of a victim. Zahra exemplifies the systemic mistreatment of women in certain societies. By denying his daughter autonomy, her father forced her into an abnormal life, subjecting her to traumatic experiences by imposing a completely new identity upon her:

You are a good woman, a submissive and obedient wife, but after you had your seventh daughter, I realized that you carry some infirmity within you: your belly cannot conceive a male child.... of course, you may reproach me with lacking tenderness toward your daughters. They are yours. I have given them my name, but I cannot give them my affection, because I never wanted them. They arrived by mistake; in place of the boy, I have yearned for. You will understand why I no longer see them or concern myself with their fate (Ben Jelloun, 1985/1987, pp. 12–13).

To this end, it can be deduced that postmodernism abandons the closed structures and fixed meanings that arise out of dominant discourses. Instead, it prioritizes the decentered and open-ended nature of language, texts, and discourse. From this perspective, every idea is subject to debate and dependent on specific circumstances. Postmodernism rejects the pre-existing essence central to traditional Western thought, asserting instead that fluidity and change are the primary forces governing human existence.

Modernism gave significant importance to institutions as the primary reference for social interaction. Modern social construction relies on institutional frameworks that prescribe the mechanisms of thinking, acting, and interacting within a community. Modernism emerged from the European Enlightenment of the mid-18th century. Hollinger (1994) described the defining aspects of modernity as follows:

[The term modernity denotes] a society that is highly differentiated from a structural-functional point of view, dominated by capitalist (market) economy, with a complex division of labor, industrialization and urbanization, science and technology, political and ethical individualism, liberal utilitarianism and social contract theory. (p. xiii)

The rise of science gave rise to a rationalistic perspective that often marginalized other dimensions of life. In its aftermath, modernism sought to ground every social aspect in rational thought, prioritizing the determination of how social structures should operate. Institutions were established to standardize behavior and prescribe the rules essential for scientific

development and human progress. In this sense, modernism ‘Westernized the West’ by building its ideology on science, empirical research, and discovery. A classic example of modernist translation that “Westernizes the West” while exoticizing the Other is Edward Lane’s 19th-century translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Lane approached the text with a scientific eye, incorporating detailed ethnographic notes to explain Arab customs. Through his translation and explanatory notes, he frequently portrayed Arabs as more inclined toward superstition and less guided by reason than educated Western readers. As a result, his work offered an interpretive lens shaped by the dominant cultural attitudes of the period, leading readers to perceive the source culture as an object of observation rather than as a complex and evolving society. Specifically, although the tales are set in and derived from a variety of regions—including Persia, India, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt—Lane frequently interprets their customs and social practices through the lens of nineteenth-century Cairo. His explanatory notes often employ broad statements such as “The Arabs of Egypt usually...” or “Muslims believe...”, reflecting his tendency to use Egyptian society as an interpretive framework for explaining the broader Islamic world (Lane, 1838–1841/2009).

The Arabian Nights has been continuously foreignized and systematically modified by various translators to amplify textual strangeness and foreground an exoticized lifestyle. Evaluating this historical manipulation, Sylvette Larzul examined the highly controversial translation by Jean-Charles Mardrus, drawing a striking conclusion: “A very free rewriting of the original, Mardrus’s *One Thousand and One Nights* offers an image of the Orient where exoticism is heavily tinged with eroticism” [“Réécriture très libre de l’original, Les Mille Nuits et Une Nuit de Mardrus offrent de l’Orient une image où l’exotisme se teinte fortement d’érotisme”] (as cited in Ettoubi, 2023, p. 18; see also Larzul, 1994, p. 46). Richard Francis Burton’s landmark translation of *The Arabian Nights* (1885–1888) stands out because it breaks away from conventional Victorian prose, choosing instead to recreate the actual structures of the original Arabic. By using rhythmic, repetitive English pairings like “time of times” and “long gone by,” Burton (1885–1888/2001) manages to capture the musical cadence of *saj’* (rhymed prose). Rather than watering down these cultural expressions into a standard Western opening like “Once upon a time,” he deliberately leans into their foreignness. This heightened, archaic diction serves as a clear narrative strategy, letting nineteenth-century Western readers know immediately that they are stepping into an ancient, mystical, and completely different storytelling tradition.

Conversely, a postmodern approach to Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *The Sand Child* (1985/1987) and *The Sacred Night* (1987/1989) focuses on the open-ended nature of the text to resist these stereotypes. A postmodern translator would highlight how Zahra’s story is not just a “Moroccan woman’s tragedy” but a complex intertextual dialogue with French literature and North African oral traditions. Instead of “naturalizing” the text to make Zahra a submissive victim—a common stereotype that serves Western political agendas—a postmodern reading foregrounds her agency and the “decentered” nature of her identity. As a multidimensional figure, Zahra/Ahmed constantly shifts between different functions and categories of self-definition. Thus, this hybrid existence ensures that the protagonist’s life story remains resistant to any single, stable paradigm or categorization. This keeps the reader from getting a false impression. In addition, it forces them to see the “Other” as a real, complicated person instead of just another victim of male persecution.

Postmodernists denounce any tendency to canonize a singular representation of reality, asserting that reality cannot be captured through a unique perspective. Because reality is inherently multidimensional, it can only be understood when fully contextualized; every element of human experience is dependent on the specific atmosphere and circumstances that produced it. From this perspective, cultural phenomena must not be explained through the logic of external rules; rather, they should be understood through the unique characteristics of their own environment. This approach to translation, therefore, prioritizes cultural diversity instead of reinforcing ideologies of supremacy. Its primary role is to valorize differences, representing

them in a way that encourages a process of mutual discovery—enabling individuals to better understand themselves as they encounter cultures beyond their own borders.

Dominant discourses tend to produce a universal attitude toward truth, rooted in discursive analyses that authenticate their hegemonic practices. Western discourse substantiates its cultural supremacy by representing the West as the primary system of reference, whereby a Western perspective of truth is produced and exported for universal consumption. Nietzsche (1901/1968) rejects this notion—originally stemming from Kant’s argument for the universality of truth—claiming instead that truth does not exist in a singular form. Because human beings possess diverse thinking methods and unique cognitive frameworks, every individual perceives reality from their own distinct perspective, rendering any claim to a universal, ‘pre-existing’ essence invalid. Drawing on Nietzsche’s point, one can argue that how individuals conceive truth is naturally linked to the cultural milieu in which their cognitive capacities are constructed. Importantly, ecological particularities, historical backgrounds, and cultural heritage all shape the construction of truth; thus, truth is intrinsically local and dependent on the prevalent circumstances of a given community. In this sense, truth is entirely context-dependent, varying according to the specific nature of the environment it inhabits. Specifically, if there’s no such thing as an absolute “truth”—the way Nietzsche argues—then any translator who claims they have captured the “one true meaning” of *The Sand Child* is actually just forcing their own point of view onto the story.

“The Death of the Author” and the Birth of the Reader in Translation

The human ability to produce and create an indefinite number of utterances gives rise to the necessity of interpretation. According to Chomsky (as cited in Lyons, 1981, p. 233), creativity is a uniquely human attribute that distinguishes individuals from machines. Individuals are capable of producing new, unprecedented, and comprehensible utterances through their engagement with language within a specific social context. Chomsky, in this sense, views language as a finite system of rules capable of producing an infinite number of utterances. As discussed above, the human capacity for infinite linguistic expression inevitably encounters social boundaries that impose cultural norms to regulate language use. Thus, an intrinsic connection exists between the grammatical structures a language demands and the cultural constraints a community prescribes. The productivity of language and the innate creativity with which humans are endowed render the process of understanding exceptionally complex, as no lexical item possesses a final or unique meaning. The emotive nature of language necessitates a systematic investigation of a text’s inner structure to grasp the author’s intended message within its specific cultural framework. In this sense, the emotiveness of language determines the meaning of a lexical item; consequently, its significance within one textual structure will differ substantially when transposed into a different context. Consequently, characterizing Zahra purely as a “victim” overlooks her agency. In Morocco, the emotional weight of her story can be read as a form of resistance; however, if a Western translator only focuses on the literal words of her suffering, they lose that deeper meaning. By labeling her a victim, the translator ends up “fixing” a story that is meant to be a complex, open-ended space.

Linguistic competence does not guarantee that a translator will grasp the underlying message of a text. Importantly, even native speakers who share a common heritage must contextualize their utterances to prevent misunderstanding. Because language is employed across diverse situations and for varying purposes, the significance of any utterance is fundamentally dependent on the situation. In the translation process, every lexical item must be situated within its specific context. A successful transposition of the original content is only achieved through a deep insight into how language operates within different scenarios to meet the communicative needs of a specific community. To this end, the presence of the translator, along with their linguistic and cultural competence, is vital in forming meaning out of the general environment that produced the source text. In this regard, Venuti (1995) calls for the

translator's visibility, demanding that translations be read in a way that reminds readers they are experiencing the text through another's interpretation. Consequently, he advocates for a more self-aware and ethically responsible practice—one that simultaneously exposes the translator's presence and preserves the foreignness of the original text.

The linguistic system only becomes meaningful once an author's ideas are adequately articulated through a given language. Meaning-making, in this sense, occurs through the author's engagement with language; thus, the text serves as the embodiment of the author's conceptualization. From this perspective, translation can only occur after the translator has read, understood, and interpreted the work—as meaning remains hidden until the textual structure is fully deconstructed and deciphered. In his seminal essay, "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes (1967/1977) argues that the reader serves as the co-creator or 'second author' of the text. He asserts that authorial intent is irrelevant to the internal life of the work, as meaning is generated solely through the system of relations functioning within the text itself. In this sense, Barthes redirects the reader's focus away from the author's biography and toward the internal linguistic structures that allow for a proliferation of possible meanings. For Barthes (1967), the author's intent is not essential for grasping a text's significance; interpretation begins only when a reader engages with the work to construct meaning. Because there is no singular "final" reading, the text remains open to a variety of interpretations that effectively allow every reader to become a new author. In this vein, Barthes (1967/1977) argued that "once the Author is gone, the claim to 'decipher' a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing" (p.147).

Drawing on Barthes's perspective, the text can be seen as a "no man's land" where every reading constitutes a new act of writing. Each reader essentially rewrites the text through their own subjective lens. Thus, no final interpretation exists; the process depends primarily on the reader's background, social context, and emotional state. In this sense, the text is liberated from authorial intent, shifting the focus toward internal textual structures and the reader's active role in constructing meaning. In this respect, meaning is continually created throughout the various readings to which a particular text is exposed. Barthes argues that assigning an author to a text effectively restricts the reader's mind, directing them toward a singular interpretation. He suggests that the unity of a text lies not in its origin, but in its destination:

A text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogues with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination. (Barthes, 1967/1977, p. 148)

In the realm of textual interpretation, Barthes privileges the reader by declaring the "death" of the author, whose influence is no longer definitive. Importantly, the text is liberated from a singular, final meaning, allowing for infinite interpretive possibilities.

Limiting a text's meaning to the author's environment and cultural background can negatively bias how a target reader approaches the work. Readers may seek out specific authors simply because they originate from regions perceived as "exotic" or "strange." To this end, the reader is conditioned to expect the author to perform their cultural identity for entertainment, a process that reinforces stereotypes and reduces the text to a mere ethnographic artifact rather than a site of multiple meanings. For example, the English translation of the novels *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night* shows the extent to which women are persecuted by the social paradigm that gives place to patriarchy as a social regime. The novels can be seen as examples of what happens in reality, for women in the East may live the same life that Zahra or her mother lived in the novels. Eastern women may be looked at as passive creatures without any

role or influence within their society, as their sole function is to give birth to children and obey their husbands. The translator shows us how Ben Jelloun represents the father and the mother as victims of their social structure and of the way it perceives power: “I told myself that the words had the savor of life. For all those women, life was limited. It did not amount to much more than cooking, house-work, waiting around, and, once a week, a restful afternoon in the hammam. I was secretly pleased that I did not belong to that limited world” (Ben Jelloun, 1985/1987, p. 23). However, a postmodern interpretation must challenge the presumed universality of patriarchy as a social regime, particularly when applied to the eastern world. The singular representation offered by the translation must be questioned, as it imposes fixed, Westernized identities onto the characters. Therefore, Zahra’s life story is deeply bound to the particularities of her immediate family and personal circumstances, illustrating how every human experience must be contextualized within the specific socio-cultural dynamics that produced it. Consequently, the lived experiences of young women in Morocco cannot be treated as a monolith; rather, a multitude of intersecting factors dynamically shape the distinct realities and paths an individual must navigate.

Accordingly, Edward W. Said (1978) argued that the West misrepresents the East because Western readers often fail to engage directly with authentic Eastern voices. Instead, Western knowledge of the East is frequently the byproduct of fabricated interpretations. In this context, a significant portion of Arabic literature translated into Western languages has historically focused on themes of sensuality and Sufism. Said (1978) suggested that such translations reinforce the persistent image of the East as an exotic realm defined by “romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes” (p. 1). Therefore, to avoid reproducing stereotypes, the reading process must facilitate an authentic contact with the text, allowing for a more nuanced awareness of the “Other” to be constructed.

The translator should disregard the cult of the author and focus primarily on the text’s internal structures. By doing so, the translator preserves the multiplicity of the work, enabling every reader to produce their own perspective and preventing the text from being reduced to a fixed, exoticized interpretation. In this way, the translator is themselves a reader who must focus their efforts on the intrinsic textual structures to understand the work’s potential meanings. While the translator’s reading process produces a specific perspective, the target reader’s subsequent engagement may diverge from or even oppose that initial conception. Crucially, the internal textual structure discloses meaning according to the unique lens through which each reader approaches the text.

The concept of meaning remains debatable and open to diverse interpretations, especially since a single narrative situation can be decoded in multiple ways. The perceived presence of the author may stifle a reader’s curiosity, preventing a deeper engagement with the culture through the text. In this regard, Foucault (1969) argued that “we must locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers” (p. 121). The author’s presence classifies the text and allows their ideology to dictate meaning. Foucault suggests that the text becomes the property of an “author-function,” which significantly impacts the reader’s preconceived notions. In this respect, Foucault (1969) argued:

It would seem that the author’s name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. (p. 123)

An impartial transposition of the source text requires the translator to disregard the author and instead examine the core components of the textual structure. By doing so, the translation can reveal the diverse cultural aspects inherent in the work without authorial bias. In this vein, the translator’s viewpoint serves merely as a starting point for the target reader’s own interpretations. Foucault (1969) argued that the author’s primary role in a fictitious work is to

restrict the flow of ideas. The author is therefore “the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (p. 118). In this regard, the author acts as a guide who directs the search for meaning toward a single destination. The author’s persona effectively becomes the reader’s preconceived background knowledge, framing the work even before the reading process begins. Meaning, in this sense, is independently present within the work and can be revealed through diverse interpretive acts. Foucault (1969) suggests that the author’s role as a restrictive force is a product of specific historical and economic conditions rather than a natural necessity:

The author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive; a role quite characteristic of our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property, still, given the historical modifications that are taking place, it does not seem necessary that the author function remain constant in form, complexity, and even in existence. (p. 119)

This potential disappearance of the “author function” allows the translator to act as a catalyst for a more open, unmediated engagement between the source culture and the target reader. For example, the life story of Zahra in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s (1985/1987) *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night* (1987/1989) is situated within specific familial and social circumstances that must be understood to grasp her lived experience. However, while every human experience should be contextualized according to the environment that produced it, it must simultaneously remain open to the diverse interpretations of the reader. By refusing to let Zahra’s identity be “fixed” by authorial or cultural stereotypes, the translator allows the text to function as a site of multiple, evolving meanings. Crucially, because the novel doesn’t rely on a single, authoritative narrator, readers are invited to shape the meaning of the story for themselves. This open structure allows Zahra’s life to be seen through many different lenses, which reflects the true depth and complexity of the culture it depicts. By refusing a singular truth, the text challenges the stereotypical perspective of the dominant discourse, exposing the embodied meaning to a continuous process of enunciation and negotiation.

The text remains a fertile and inexhaustible space, capable of generating an endless variety of meanings. Readers bring their own knowledge, sentiments, and cultural backgrounds to the act of reading; they investigate the structural components of the work while searching for their own subjectivity within its characters and ideas. Every reader brings new life into the text by discovering it through their unique expectations and experiences. Accordingly, the translator transposes the message of the source text according to their specific understanding, which may then be received differently by the target audience. In this sense, translation can be conceptualized as a fundamental act of interpretation; the reading process itself becomes a form of internal translation that paraphrases and reconstructs ideas to make them meaningful.

According to Foucault (1969), readers produce their own sense of meaning by interpreting the prevalent discourse within a text. Barthes (1967/1977) declares the “death” of the author because a textual structure’s content cannot be confined to a single individual or a specific historical moment. Instead, every work embodies diverse ideologies that have been developed, modified, and reconstructed throughout the evolution of human thought. Therefore, the work is not the property of the author; rather, the text serves as a site for the reader, whose engagement with textual features triggers a proliferation of meaning. As Foucault (1969) famously noted, the author acts as a “functional principle” that society uses to limit this very proliferation, marking the “ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (p. 118).

A reader’s interpretation is not merely a reproduction of a pre-existing perspective; rather, it generates entirely new meanings for the text. Thus, translation constitutes a transformation of the translator’s unique viewpoint. The target reader, in turn, develops a fresh perspective that may diverge from that of the translator, thereby enriching the aesthetic beauty and inherent diversity of the source text. Approaching the source text in this manner challenges the

stereotypical representation of foreign cultures by shifting the responsibility for meaning-construction to the reader. Thus, Western discourses based on “othering” are disrupted, as reader-centered interpretation bypasses the commercialization of the “Other.” As Graham Huggan (2001) argues, commercial and institutional processes often govern literary production; Western publishers frequently seek to commodify “otherness” by highlighting folkloristic aspects that differentiate the subject and render them appealing to a Western readership (p. 27). Huggan (2001) argues that certain criteria often dictate which literary works are selected for translation and global consumption. He uses the example of Salman Rushdie to demonstrate how authors may consciously or unconsciously perform for a Western gaze:

The commercial success of *Midnight's Children* owes much to the canniness with which its author displays this seductive process. Rushdie's novel exhibits the wares of Western literary exoticism. Most of the familiar semiotic markers of Orientalism are there: snake-charmers, genies, fakirs, and the like... (p. 27)

The Western readership's perception is often shaped to imagine the East as primitive, as the themes in translated works are carefully selected to reproduce Orientalist stereotypes. However, when the interpretive process becomes reader-centered—whether during the act of translating or the subsequent reading of that translation—the text is transformed into an open source of knowledge. Importantly, meaning can be interpreted flexibly, adapting to diverse cultural and historical circumstances rather than being fixed by a commercialized authorial image.

5. Conclusion

Viewing translation as an act of interpretation is essential for it to serve as a genuine tool for cultural resistance. The dominant narratives that influence cultural reputations often depend on widely accepted interpretations and conventional viewpoints, allowing certain stereotypes to endure. Viewing a text as open to multiple meanings invites readers to explore different perspectives, fostering a more nuanced understanding that questions oversimplified and reductionist interpretations. However, when a reader approaches a text without a checklist of preconceived expectations, they become open to reconstructing their understanding of a culture through direct engagement rather than passive stereotyping. By looking closely at *The Thousand and One Nights*, *The Sand Child*, and *The Sacred Night* this paper shows how this works in practice: when we remove standard authorial and institutional constraints, the translator-reader finally gains the creative agency needed to break down rigid cultural narratives.

This is where the paper makes its main contribution to translation studies. By bridging abstract postmodern ideas—like those of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida—with Said's postcolonial critique, it moves us away from seeing the translator as just a passive bridge between cultures, and instead reframes them as an active, politically aware creator of meaning. What this paper calls for is a text-level reconstruction of cultural encounters that prioritizes freedom and original interpretation. When a text is locked down by authorial power or its cultural origin, reading simply turns into a passive repetition of old ideas, which only ends up reinforcing the very power dynamics it should be fighting.

Crucially, however, interpretive openness should not be viewed as a definitive solution to deep-seated cultural stereotyping. While an open-ended approach empowers individual translator-readers to resist dominant narratives, translation remains inherently entangled with global systemic inequalities, commercial publishing constraints, and the translator's own unconscious biases. Furthermore, because this study is a conceptual and theoretical essay focusing on three specific literary works, its insights cannot be directly generalized to standard, everyday commercial translation workflows. Acknowledging these limitations does not diminish the argument; rather, it highlights critical pathways for future research. Specifically, subsequent studies should explore how this form of interpretive freedom operates within

collaborative digital spaces and contemporary translation industries, where asymmetrical power dynamics continue to persist.

6. References

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