

The Challenge of Conveying Cultural Identity in the Translation of Contemporary Algerian Literature

تحدي نقل الهوية الثقافية في ترجمة الأدب الجزائري المعاصر

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Abstract:

This paper examines the multifaceted challenge of conveying cultural identity in the translation and recording of contemporary Algerian literature. Situated at the intersection of Arabic, Berber, and French cultural traditions, modern Algerian literary production presents translators with a uniquely complex set of problems: linguistic registers, untranslatable cultural references, colonial and post-colonial history, and the nature of national identity itself. Through close readings of major Algerian writers, this paper analyzes the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of their work, before turning to the theoretical problems. It , further, argues that translating literature demands not merely linguistic competence but a deep engagement with the civilizational complexity that defines Algerian identity. The conclusion proposes a framework for culturally sensitive translation practice that honors both the source culture and the expectations of the target audience.

Keywords: Literature; Translation; Cultural Identity; Image; Signification.

ملخص:

تفحص هذه الورقة البحثية التحدي المتعدد الأوجه لنقل الهوية الثقافية في ترجمة وتوثيق الأدب الجزائري المعاصر، حيث تتداخل التقاليد الثقافية العربية والأمازيغية والفرنسية. إن ترجمة الأدب الجزائري المعاصر عملية معقدة تواجهها الكثير من العقبات كاختلاف السجلات اللغوية والمراجع الثقافية غير القابلة للترجمة وأيضاً التاريخ الاستعماري وما بعد الاستعماري وطبيعة الهوية الوطنية نفسها.

تحلل هذه الورقة، من خلال قراءات دقيقة لكتّاب جزائريين بارزين، الأبعاد الجمالية والأيدولوجية لعملهم، قبل أن تنتقل إلى المشاكل النظرية التي تطرحها ترجمة الصور الأدبية، والدلالة، والمعنى المتجذر ثقافياً. فاستناداً إلى نظرية الترجمة، والنقد الأدبي، والدراسات الثقافية، فالإشكالية المطروحة: هل ترجمة الأدب تتطلب الكفاءة اللغوية أم انخراطاً ثقافياً عميقاً مع التعقيد الحضاري الذي يحدد الهوية الجزائرية؟ وهل الممارسة الترجمة الحساسة ثقافياً تكرم كل من الثقافة المصدر وتوقعات الجمهور المستهدف أم تظلم أحدهما؟

كلمات مفتاحية: الأدب، الترجمة، الهوية الثقافية، الصورة، الدلالة.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Translation is not merely a linguistic operation but a complex act of cultural mediation through which identities, values, and historical experiences are transferred across languages. Literary translation is particularly challenging because literary texts are deeply embedded in the cultural and ideological contexts in which they are produced. Consequently, translators must negotiate not only linguistic differences but also culturally specific meanings, symbols, and worldviews.

Contemporary Algerian literature provides a remarkable example of this complexity. Emerging from the interaction of Arabic, Amazigh, and French linguistic traditions, it reflects Algeria's colonial history, postcolonial identity, and multicultural heritage. Many Algerian authors writing in French consciously incorporate Amazigh and Arabic cultural elements into their texts, creating works whose meanings extend beyond their linguistic surface. This cultural hybridity makes literary translation especially demanding, as translators are required to preserve both the aesthetic qualities of the source text and its cultural identity.

Although several studies have discussed Algerian literature or literary translation separately, relatively few have examined how cultural identity is negotiated through the translation of contemporary Algerian literary texts. Existing research often emphasizes historical or descriptive perspectives without providing detailed textual analyses of translation strategies.

This study addresses the following research question:

How can translators effectively convey the cultural identity embedded in contemporary Algerian literary texts while maintaining both textual fidelity and cultural intelligibility for the target readership?

This study hypothesizes that successful translation of contemporary Algerian literature depends on combining foreignization and functional equivalence strategies. Such a balanced approach enables translators to preserve culturally specific elements while ensuring accessibility for target readers.

To investigate this hypothesis, the paper analyzes representative works by selected contemporary Algerian authors and examines the translation challenges posed by culturally bound expressions, literary imagery, and culturally embedded meanings. The study combines insights from Translation Studies with close textual analysis to demonstrate how translation strategies influence the representation of Algerian cultural identity.

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach grounded in Translation Studies and Comparative Literary Analysis. Rather than providing a purely historical overview of Algerian literature, the research focuses on examining how cultural identity is represented and transferred through literary translation.

The analysis is based on a purposive corpus consisting of representative works by major contemporary Algerian writers, including Mouloud Mammeri, Mohamed Dib, Malek Haddad, Kateb Yacine, Assia Djebar, Rachid Boudjedra, Rachid Mimouni,

and Mouloud Feraoun. These authors were selected because they collectively represent the linguistic, cultural, and ideological diversity of contemporary Algerian literature. Their writings incorporate Arabic, Amazigh, and French cultural traditions and therefore provide rich material for investigating translation challenges.

The analytical framework combines concepts from cultural translation, functional equivalence (Nida), foreignization and domestication (Venuti), and cultural mediation. Selected literary passages are examined to identify culturally specific expressions, metaphors, and references before comparing possible translation strategies and evaluating their effectiveness in preserving cultural identity. Recent developments in Translation Studies emphasize that translation should be understood as intercultural communication rather than mere linguistic substitution (Munday, 2022; House, 2023).

The study relies on close textual analysis rather than general description. Each selected example is analyzed according to:

- the cultural element embedded in the source text;
- the translation challenge it presents;
- the translation strategy employed;
- and the extent to which the translated version preserves the cultural identity of the original text.

This methodology enables a systematic evaluation of translation choices and provides evidence for assessing how different strategies contribute to representing Algerian cultural identity across languages.

2. Historical and Cultural Background of Modern Algerian Literature

2.1 The Colonial Context

To understand modern Algerian literature, it is essential to understand the colonial context from which it emerged. France colonized Algeria in 1830, beginning a 132-year occupation that would profoundly reshape every aspect of Algerian society; its economy, its social structure, its educational system, and its cultural life. The French colonial project in Algeria was distinguished by its particular intensity: unlike many other colonial ventures, France officially designated Algeria as an integral part of French territory rather than a protectorate or colony in the conventional sense (Shukri, 2012, p. 109).

The consequences for Algerian cultural life were profound. The Arabic language was systematically marginalized in official contexts, replaced by French as the language of administration, education, and legal proceedings. Traditional Koranic schools were suppressed or reduced in influence. The Berber languages, particularly Kabyle in the mountainous regions of the northeast, were similarly excluded from official recognition. Algerians who wished to participate in modern intellectual and literary life were thus compelled, in many cases, to do so in French, the language of the colonizer (Bamiya, 1989, p. 13).

This linguistic situation gave rise to a generation of Algerian writers who were, in

a sense, translators before they were authors. Writing in French, they were simultaneously engaging with the literary tradition of their colonizers and expressing the cultural, emotional, and political realities of their own people. The result was a literature marked by a fundamental duality in language, in cultural reference, and in political positioning (Awaiss, 2002, p. 263).

2.2 The Emergence of a National Literary Identity

The Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) provided the defining crucible for modern Algerian literature. The war galvanized an entire generation of writers, providing them with a collective experience of suffering, resistance, and eventual liberation that would shape their literary output for decades. Literature became a form of resistance in its own right, a way of asserting the existence, humanity, and cultural richness of a people that colonial ideology had systematically dehumanized and marginalized (Shukri, 2012, p. 109).

At the same time, the war created new tensions and ambivalences within the literary field. Writers who expressed themselves in French faced accusations of cultural collaboration, of perpetuating the colonizer's language even while attacking colonialism's political and human consequences. Others argued that the use of French was itself a form of resistance; a seizure of the colonizer's cultural tools in the service of liberation. This debate would continue long after independence was achieved in 1962, shaping the literary and cultural politics of the new Algerian state (Bamiya, 1989, p. 13).

2.3 The Three Cultural Tributaries

What sets modern Algerian literature apart from other Arabic literary traditions is its rare convergence of three foundational cultural influences: the local Algerian (including its Berber/Amazigh substrate), the Arab-Islamic tradition, and the Latin-French element introduced by colonization. These strands merged linguistically and culturally over centuries before being recast in an Arab-Algerian national identity during the reclamation of national sovereignty in the final decades of the twentieth century (Shukri, 2012, p. 109).

The outcome of this convergence was a literature that was Algerian at its core before it was Latin-French, and before it was Arab shaped by the land, history, and the Algerian people themselves. This rich, composite identity gave rise to a literary tradition drawing from multiple origins, all flowing into the broader current of Algerian cultural life (Bamiya, 1989, p. 13). For the translator, this multi-layered cultural inheritance creates a challenge of exceptional complexity: a text written in French may simultaneously invoke Arabic rhetorical traditions, Berber oral culture, Islamic religious sensibility, and French literary conventions, all within the same paragraph or even the same sentence.

The Algerian novel written in French became a notable cultural and linguistic

phenomenon, sparking considerable critical debate. Some scholars categorized it as Arabic literature based on its intellectual and social concerns, while others viewed it as a distinctly Algerian contribution in a French medium. Early attempts at novel writing appeared between 1920 and 1930, with the first significant works emerging from writers who sought to navigate between the expectations of French publishers and the realities of Algerian life (Bamiya, 1989, p. 13).

3. Major Writers of Modern Algerian Literature

3.1 Mammeri's Heritage

Mouloud Mammeri occupies a central position in the canon of modern Algerian literature. Born in 1917 in the Kabyle village of Taourirt-Mimoun, Mammeri was educated in French schools before pursuing higher studies in Paris, an experience that gave him intimate knowledge of both cultures and that would inform his literary work throughout his career. His writing is distinguished by its deep commitment to Kabyle cultural heritage, its unflinching examination of colonial oppression, and its exploration of the psychological cost of cultural displacement (Mammeri, 1952, p. 32).

Mammeri's fiction runs parallel to Algeria's political evolution. *The Forgotten Hill* (*La colline oubliée*, 1952) captures pre-war colonial Algeria with unflinching honesty, portraying a people living under occupation without apparent recourse, yet with emerging signs of hope. The novel centers on a Kabyle village and its young men, who are caught between the traditional world of their ancestors and the demands of a colonial modernity that offers them neither belonging nor respect. The novel's power lies in its refusal of easy solutions: colonialism offers no redemption, and the seeds of resistance are only beginning to germinate (Mammeri, 1952, p. 32).

In *The Sleep of the Just* (*Le sommeil du juste*, 1965), the protagonist Arzaki navigates Western society with initial optimism, only to emerge from the experience hollow and disillusioned. His schooling in a foreign language had been isolating, yet his pride in his achievements sustained him. Arzaki's relationship with his father marks a broader generational rupture. The first step in the loosening of family bonds and the fragmentation of Algerian society (Mammeri, 1965a, p. 40). The novel anticipates many of the themes that would become central to Algerian literature of the post-independence era: the disillusion of educated Algerians who expected that independence would resolve the contradictions of colonial modernity, only to find themselves caught between two worlds and fully at home in neither.

L'opium et le bâton (1965) stands as a landmark of post-independence Algerian literature in French. Mammeri's first novel about the Algerian revolution, it reflects his commitment to clear and established realities rather than unfolding ones (Mammeri, 1965b, p. 36). The novel probes national consciousness through class distinctions and critical awareness, embodied in the figure of Dr. Bachir initially seeming self-absorbed, yet revealed over the course of the narrative to be the true moral center. For the translator, Mammeri's prose presents particular challenges: his French is inflected

with Kabyle rhythms and idioms, his cultural references span multiple traditions, and his narrative technique shifts between realism and a more symbolic, almost mythological mode.

3.2 Dib's Heritage

Mohamed Dib is widely regarded as a pioneer of modern Algerian literature in French. Born in Tlemcen in 1920, Dib worked in textile factories and as an accountant and journalist before turning to literature. These experiences of labor and economic marginalization left a deep mark on his writing, giving it a social consciousness that distinguishes it from the more individualistic literary traditions of metropolitan France (Nikiforovna, 1989a, p. 19).

His trilogy beginning with *La grande maison* (1954) and continuing with *L'Incendie* (1954) and *Le métier à tisser* (1957) has been called 'the memoirs of the Algerian people,' chronicling both urban workers and rural peasants in vivid detail (Dib, 1959, p. 20). His early style blends concision with lyrical depth, filtering the harshness of colonial life through a child's perception of the world. The young protagonist Omar serves as a lens through which the reader perceives colonial Algeria: its poverty, its violence, its moments of human solidarity and warmth, and the slow kindling of revolutionary consciousness.

As his career progressed, Dib moved away from Balzacian social realism toward more experimental narrative forms. He was deeply influenced by Virginia Woolf particularly *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse* and the stream of consciousness technique left a clear imprint on works such as *The Dance of the King* (*La danse du roi*, 1968). In this novel, the characters raise questions about the absurdity of life and contemplate the passage of time, expressing their desire to stop it. A direct echo of Woolf's own existential preoccupations (Nikiforovna, 1989a, p. 19). Dib was also influenced by French symbolist poets Mallarmé and Valéry, whose attention to the music and materiality of language shaped his own poetic prose.

Who Remembers the Sea (*Qui se souvient de la mer*, 1962) marked a decisive aesthetic shift, incorporating elements of magical realism and dense symbolic imagery. The novel abandoned the linear temporality of classical narrative in favor of a fragmented, hallucinatory structure that mirrors the chaos and terror of the war itself. His later novels elevated the Algerian revolution into the realm of 'symbolic fantasy,' where colonialism became something monstrous and alien, and resistance took on an almost mythic character. Exile became an increasingly prominent theme in Dib's later work, culminating in protagonists consumed by isolation and the aching pull of memory (Nikiforovna, 1989a, p. 19).

3.3 Haddad's Heritage

Malek Haddad carried throughout his life what might be called a double burden: the weight of colonialism and the estrangement of writing in a language not his own.

Born in Constantine in 1927, Haddad was a poet before he was a novelist, and this priority of the lyrical over the narrative profoundly shaped his fiction. His novels function more as impressionistic prose-poems than conventional narratives, driven by emotion and patriotic feeling rather than intellectual argument (Haddad, 1959, p. 30).

Haddad's sensitivity to the paradox of his linguistic situation expressing Algerian experience in the language of the colonizer gives his work a particular poignancy. He viewed the French language not as a tool of liberation but as a form of exile, a border that separated him from his own people and his own culture. This awareness of linguistic estrangement infuses all his novels, giving them a melancholy undertone even in their moments of patriotic exaltation (Nikiforovna, 1989b, p. 11).

His commitment, as he understood it, was to his characters first, yet he never turned away from the liberation struggle. *The Student and the Lesson* (L'élève et la leçon) is widely considered his finest work: a sustained interior monologue centered on an elderly Algerian doctor living in France, grappling with questions of identity, memory, and resistance. Through the doctor's daughter and her companion, Haddad evokes the symbols of Algerian resistance to French occupation. The novel's generational conflict father against daughter, tradition against revolution resonates as one of the defining tensions of its era (Nikiforovna, 1989b, p. 11). After independence was achieved, Haddad published no further novels, as if the removal of the colonial situation had also removed the linguistic exile that had been his creative engine.

3.4 Kateb Yacine's Heritage

Nedjma (1956) is broadly regarded as the defining achievement of the modern Algerian novel. Both Western and Arab critics have recognized it as a work that embodies, in form and content, the full arc of Algeria's suffering and resistance. The title character, simultaneously a woman, a spirit, and a symbol of the nation holds the novel together as a living, breathing presence. She is at once the object of desire and the subject of history, a figure who condenses within herself all the contradictions and aspirations of Algerian identity (Kateb, 1956a, p. 18).

The novel's fractured temporal structure has been compared to Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*. Yacine openly acknowledged his debt to James Joyce, from whom he drew the stream of consciousness technique, while borrowing temporal fragmentation from Faulkner. A striking parallel exists with Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* both novels share an ambiguity surrounding the origins of some characters (Faulkner, 1936, p. 36; Kateb, 1956b, p. 18; Bamiya, 1989, p. 13). Like Faulkner and Durrell, Yacine attributes time to the internal formation of character rather than to external chronology, embodying an experience that extends from the distant past to the far future.

The novel draws extensively on Algerian myth and legend, particularly the legend of the tribe of Keblout; a Bedouin tribe that came to Algeria from the Arab East in ancient times and resisted successive waves of invaders across the generations. This

mythological substrate gives the novel a depth of cultural resonance that presents extraordinary challenges for the translator. The names, the tribal relationships, the specific quality of the landscape all carry cultural meanings that cannot simply be explained in footnotes without disrupting the reading experience (Kateb, 1956b, p. 18; Bamiya, 1989, p. 13). Yacine was also influenced by the French poets Rimbaud and Baudelaire, whose symbolic imagery and attention to the unconscious dimensions of experience left a clear mark on his narrative technique.

3.5 Djebbar's Heritage

Assia Djebbar occupies a singular position in Algerian literature. The first Algerian woman to achieve international literary recognition, Djebbar brought to her fiction a perspective shaped by both the gender politics of Algerian society and the intellectual traditions of French feminism. Unlike her contemporaries, she believed that fiction requires temporal distance from the events it depicts. The honest evaluation of historical events demands the same distance from a novelist as from a historian (Bamiya, 1989, p. 13).

Her early novel *La soif* (1957), written during the war years, deliberately avoided the conflict, representing for Djebbar an escape from an unbearable present the French were pursuing her fiancé, and her brother was fighting in the mountains. She only addressed the liberation struggle directly in her third novel, *Les enfants du Nouveau Monde* (1962), adopting the stance of an observer rather than a participant. Her fourth novel, *Les Alouettes naïves* (1967), moved closer to the front lines into battlefields and refugee camps and into the psychology of those fighting on the Tunisian front. Her fiction as a whole constitutes an invaluable record of Algerian women's inner lives, offering access to a world that other male Algerian writers were poorly positioned to document (Bamiya, 1989, p. 13).

Djebbar was influenced by Dos Passos's typographical experimentation and by D.H. Lawrence, whose preoccupation with the relationship between men and women shaped her own exploration of bodily and emotional life. Lawrence's novels *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* had a significant impact on Djebbar's work. In her later career, particularly in the celebrated novel *L'Amour, La Fantasia* (1985), Djebbar developed a complex multi-layered narrative technique that braids together autobiographical memory, historical reconstruction, and oral testimonies of Algerian women. This technique presents particular challenges for the translator, since the shifts between registers between the literary French of historical archives and the translated testimony of illiterate women carry enormous cultural and political significance (Bamiya, 1989, p. 13).

3.6 Boudjedra's Heritage

Rachid Boudjedra dedicated most of his novels written in French to addressing the problems of the post-independence era, a period characterized by political

authoritarianism, economic mismanagement, and the persistence of social inequalities that independence had promised to abolish. His writing is notable for its formal experimentation, its linguistic density, and its willingness to attack the sacred cows of Algerian nationalist ideology (Boudjedra, 1969, p. 60).

In *La Répudiation* (1969), he employs a narrator whose mental instability serves as a kind of protective fiction granting the author extraordinary freedom to attack Algerian society, customs, and the residues of colonial violence that persisted after independence. The narrator, protected by the shield of his diagnosed madness, criticizes the conditions in Algeria before and after independence with equal venom. He attacks customs and traditions with the same violence with which he attacks revolutionary Algeria, especially the terrorism inherited from the colonial system (Boudjedra, 1969, p. 60). The novel's protagonist finds a perverse relief in his illness, which distances him from a reality he can sense but not fully confront: a new Algeria that has merely exchanged one form of oppression for another.

Boudjedra's prose style is characterized by its torrential quality long, breathless sentences that accumulate images and observations in a manner that owes something to the French *nouveau roman* and something to Arabic rhetorical tradition. This stylistic distinctiveness creates significant challenges for the translator, who must find equivalents for both the formal experiment and the cultural critique without losing either dimension.

3.7 Mimouni's Heritage

Rachid Mimouni's novels "*Le fleuve détourné*" (1982), "*Tombéza*" (1984), and "*L'Honneur de la tribu*" (1989) draw readers into mythic and existential worlds rooted in rural Algerian experience. Mimouni occupies a distinctive position in the Algerian literary canon: unlike many of his contemporaries who focused on urban intellectual experience, Mimouni's fiction is deeply rooted in the rural world, its rhythms, its oral traditions, and its confrontation with the forces of modernity (Mimouni, 1989, p. 30).

L'Honneur de la tribu (1989), caused a sensation in both French and Algerian literary circles when it appeared. Inspired in part by Paul Valéry's view that all stories ultimately reach into myth, Mimouni summoned a popular narrator to open the novel a village so remote and self-contained that no map records it, with a 'deep democracy' that requires no head of state. The village's tribal code of honor, its encounters with successive waves of outsiders, and its ultimate failure to control its own fate form the novel's moral backbone (Mimouni, 1989, p. 30).

Mimouni's critique operates on two fronts simultaneously targeting both pre-independence colonial structures and post-independence governance with equal sharpness. This double critique is embodied in the figure of Ali Ben Ali, the village boy who goes to a foreign school and returns as a postal worker, becoming the 'legitimate intermediary' between the tribe and the outside world. The narrator's sardonic voice exposes the quiet violence of administrative neglect, epitomized in the

tragicomic image of the state mandating illuminated shop signs in a village still lit by oil lamps (Mimouni, 1989, p. 30; Alloush, n.d., p. 13).

3.8 Feraoun's Heritage

Le fils du pauvre (1950) remains a cornerstone of Algerian national literature, widely read as the entry point for Algerian students encountering their own literary heritage (Feraoun, 1952, p. 38). Largely autobiographical, it traces the formation of a Kabyle child navigating two worlds: the ancient rhythms of village life governed by tradition and fate, and the alienating rigor of French schooling in a foreign tongue. The hero Fouroulou faces 'alone, alone in this terrible battle that does not forgive' the battle to master a foreign culture without losing his own soul.

His subsequent novels « *La terre et le sang* » (1953) and « *Les chemins qui montent* » (1957) explore the psychic costs of migration and cultural displacement. The return of characters from France to their Kabyle villages is rarely smooth; the experience of European life has altered them in ways their communities cannot easily accommodate (Feraoun, 1953, p. 69). Feraoun also kept a remarkable diary during the war years, published posthumously, which provides an invaluable documentary record of the daily life of an Algerian intellectual during the revolution.

Feraoun was assassinated by the OAS (the French colonial terrorist organization) in March 1962, just weeks before Algerian independence. His death was mourned internationally as the murder of a man who had devoted his life to the peaceful expression of Algerian dignity and humanity. As John Amrouche stated after the assassination: 'The main crime of the assassin was his desire to see man happy, proudly bearing his own name and happy to enjoy his homeland' (cited in Nabraj, 1989, p. 14).

4. Theoretical Dimensions of Literary Translation

4.1 Translation as Cultural Mediation

Modern translation theory has moved far beyond the simple model of translation as the transfer of propositional content from one language to another. Contemporary theorists understand translation as a form of cultural mediation – a complex negotiation between two linguistic and cultural systems that inevitably involves loss, transformation, and creative addition (Awaiss, 2002, p. 263). The translator is not a neutral conduit but an active participant in the construction of meaning, making choices at every level of the text that reflect both linguistic competence and cultural understanding.

For the translation of Algerian literature, this mediating function is especially pronounced. Algerian texts written in French are already, in a sense, translations of Kabyle oral tradition, of Arabic rhetorical practice, of the lived experience of a people whose cultural life has been shaped by forces beyond their control. When Henri Awaiss (2002) suggests that the Algerian writer expressing himself in French is

already a kind of translator, he is pointing to a fundamental truth about the nature of this literature: it is born from translation, and it returns to translation with every new reading.

This insight has important practical implications for the translator. It means that the translator of an Algerian novel is not simply moving a French text into Arabic or English they are engaging with a text that already encodes multiple layers of cultural translation. The translator must be sensitive to these layers, must understand what has been translated and what has been lost in the original act of writing, and must find ways to preserve or represent this complexity in the target text (Chikhi, 1993, p. 153).

4.2 The Problem of Translating the Literary Image

The literary image has long been considered the essential unit of creative expression in literature. Without image, literature collapses into mere communication. The image is a stylistic object that preserves the integrity of the text from distortion and presents the meaning in a way that creates a specificity of impact in the mind of the recipient (Asfour, n.d.). De Si (1989) defined the image as a composition of words charged with feelings and emotions a definition that emphasizes its dual nature as both cognitive and affective, both meaningful and beautiful.

Transferring literary images across languages is among the most demanding challenges in translation. Where familiar images may survive transit, the idiosyncrasies of each language its cultural assumptions, its religious resonances, its linguistic norms often render literal translation of original images impossible (Cohen, 1978, p. 174). The translator is thus forced to seek acceptable alternatives in the target language, inevitably introducing some deviation from the source. This demands a kind of creative authority: the ability to choose options that honor the spirit of the original while allowing the translated text to breathe naturally in its new linguistic home.

The challenge is compounded when the images in question draw on cultural traditions unfamiliar to the target audience. An image from Kabyle oral tradition, for instance, may carry a wealth of association for an Algerian reader that is entirely opaque to a reader from another cultural background. The translator must decide whether to explain the image through paraphrase or annotation, to substitute an equivalent image from the target culture, or to preserve the foreignness of the image and trust the reader to make their own meaning. Each choice has different consequences for the reader's experience and understanding (Hamidani, n.d.).

Cohen (1978) has argued that what literary texts offer are not meanings themselves but the possibility of meanings and that these possibilities tend to escape under the pressure of new formulation, most acutely at the level of rhythm, poetic weight, and image. This observation is particularly relevant to Algerian literature, which frequently operates through suggestion, allusion, and indirection rather than explicit statement. The translator who attempts to make explicit what the original leaves implicit risks destroying the very quality of the text they are trying to preserve.

4.3 The Problem of Translating Signification

Since antiquity, translation has served as the primary vehicle of intellectual exchange between civilizations. With the growth of that exchange, the problem of signification has become increasingly acute. Finding a word in one language that truly corresponds to a word in another presupposes a degree of cultural, social, and conceptual alignment that rarely exists (Omar, 2000, p. 210).

Aristotle held that meanings correspond exactly across languages that any word has an equivalent. Modern linguistics has demonstrated that this is not the case. Languages do not carve up the world in the same ways; they have different semantic fields, different connotational structures, different pragmatic conventions. A word that seems to translate another may in fact have different ranges of application, different emotional valences, and different cultural associations (Omar, 2000, p. 210).

The key difficulties in translating signification can be organized under several headings. First, differences in semantic range and contextual distribution mean that apparently equivalent words may in fact have different scopes of application in the two languages. Second, metaphorical and idiomatic expressions encode specific social and cultural experiences and almost never survive literal translation intact they are, at heart, cultural artifacts that cannot be transferred without transformation (Omar, 2000, p. 210). Third, differences in social and cultural norms mean that some meanings are so embedded in a particular social environment that finding a genuine counterpart in another language is impossible. Fourth, connotation and sound quality the musical and emotional dimensions of words cannot be resolved by dictionaries, which record denotations but not the full range of a word's cultural resonance.

4.4 Functional Equivalence and Cultural Compensation

Given the impossibility of perfect equivalence between languages and cultures, translation theorists have developed the concept of 'functional equivalence' the idea that the translator should aim to produce in the target reader an effect equivalent to that produced in the source reader, even if this requires departures from literal accuracy. This approach, developed most fully by Eugene Nida, has been influential in translation practice, though it has also been criticized for its tendency to domesticate foreign texts and thus reduce the cultural difference that translation might otherwise preserve (Awaiss, 2002, p. 263).

An alternative approach, associated with theorists such as Antoine Berman and Lawrence Venuti, emphasizes the importance of 'foreignization' of preserving the strangeness and alterity of the source text in the translation, forcing the target reader to confront a different way of seeing the world. For Algerian literature, this approach has particular force: the cultural otherness of these texts is not an obstacle to be overcome but a resource to be preserved, a way of expanding the cultural horizons of the target reader (Boutaqqalat, 1989, pp. 30–31).

In practice, most successful translators of Algerian literature have employed a

combination of these strategies domesticating where necessary to preserve readability and cultural accessibility, foreignizing where the cultural difference is central to the meaning of the text. The art of translation lies precisely in knowing which strategy to apply, and when (Hamidani, n.d.).

Contemporary translation scholars argue that successful literary translation requires balancing functional equivalence with cultural visibility rather than relying exclusively on one translation strategy (Venuti, 2018; Pym, 2021).

5. Textual Translation Analysis

Example 1: Translating Culturally Bound Expressions

One of the greatest challenges in translating Algerian literature is the rendering of culturally bound expressions. These expressions carry meanings rooted in the social, historical, and religious background of Algerian society. Literal translation often fails to communicate these cultural associations.

For example, in Mouloud Feraoun's *Le fils du pauvre*, references to Kabyle family relationships and village traditions represent more than simple social descriptions; they embody collective identity and cultural memory. A literal translation risks reducing these expressions to ordinary lexical items, thereby erasing their cultural significance.

A culturally sensitive translation should preserve the original cultural reference whenever possible while providing sufficient contextual information to facilitate understanding. This approach corresponds to Venuti's strategy of foreignization, allowing readers to encounter the cultural otherness of the source text rather than replacing it with familiar concepts from the target culture.

Example 2: Translation of Literary Images

Literary imagery presents another major challenge in Algerian literary translation. Images derived from Amazigh oral traditions or Islamic symbolism frequently possess multiple layers of meaning.

For instance, descriptions of mountains, olive trees, deserts, or ancestral villages often function as symbols of resistance, belonging, and collective memory rather than merely geographical elements.

When translating such images, translators should preserve both their poetic function and their symbolic value. Functional equivalence may successfully reproduce the emotional impact of an image, yet excessive domestication risks weakening its cultural identity.

Example 3: Colonial Vocabulary

Contemporary Algerian literature frequently reflects the colonial experience through its vocabulary.

Words such as *colons*, *caïd*, *douar*, *fellah*, and *medersa* are historically and

culturally loaded. Replacing them with generalized English terms such as village, farmer, or school removes important historical meanings.

Therefore, retaining these lexical items through borrowing or transliteration accompanied by brief explanatory notes often represents the most appropriate translation strategy.

Example 4: Multilingual Identity

Many Algerian novels combine French narration with Arabic or Amazigh expressions.

This multilingualism reflects the hybrid identity of Algerian society and should not be regarded as a linguistic imperfection. Instead, it represents an essential stylistic characteristic.

Consequently, translators should preserve multilingual elements whenever possible rather than replacing them with fully standardized target-language expressions.

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that no single translation strategy is sufficient for conveying Algerian cultural identity. Functional equivalence improves readability, whereas foreignization preserves cultural specificity. Effective literary translation therefore requires a balanced combination of both strategies according to the communicative purpose of each passage.

The findings also indicate that translators must possess not only linguistic competence but also profound historical and cultural knowledge. Cultural identity is communicated through symbols, historical references, social practices, and literary imagery, all of which require careful interpretation before translation.

6. The Problem of Translating Algerian Texts with Cultural Specificity

6.1 The Linguistic Triangle: Amazigh, French, Arabic

The translation of Algerian literature faces a challenge that is in many ways unique in world literature: the texts themselves are already the product of multiple layers of linguistic and cultural translation. A novel by Mouloud Feraoun, for instance, is written in French but thinks in Kabyle; its syntax, its imagery, its narrative rhythms are shaped by an Amazigh oral tradition that is not directly accessible to the French reader. When such a novel is subsequently translated into Arabic, the translator is working with a French text that is itself a translation of a Kabyle original (Ait Talets, 2006, para. 1).

Henri Awaiss (2002) has given this situation a theoretical formulation. He notes that the Arab writer who expresses themselves in French or, conversely, the French writer who expresses themselves in Arabic represents 'the best definition of the translator,' because the rhythm of their internal voice (in their mother language)

inevitably imposes itself on their use of the adopted language. The translator of such a writer is thus working with a text that already encodes a translation, and must find ways to preserve this encoded difference in the target text.

Feraoun himself was aware of this situation and addressed it explicitly. He acknowledged his intention to 'translate the Kabyle spirit' in his novels to convey it with all its peculiarities that distinguish it from other communities (cited in Chikhi, 1993, p. 153). This authorial intention has important implications for the translator: it means that the 'foreignness' of Feraoun's French is not a failure of linguistic mastery but a deliberate artistic choice, a way of inscribing Kabyle cultural identity into the text at the level of style.

6.2 Colonial History and Post-Colonial Reading

Algerian literature is inseparable from the colonial encounter. From the reformist writers associated with the Association of Muslim Scholars led by Abdelhamid Ben Badis to those who continued the literary struggle in French, Algerian writing has always carried within it the seeds of resistance and the assertion of human dignity (Shukri, 2012, p. 109). For the translator, this means that every text carries a political charge that must be understood and preserved in translation.

The post-colonial condition of Algerian literature creates particular interpretive challenges. Many of the key texts of this tradition were written in a political and cultural context that no longer exists, yet their concerns with identity, belonging, cultural memory, and the legacy of violence remain urgently contemporary. The translator must be sensitive to both the historical specificity of these texts and their continuing relevance, finding ways to make them speak to contemporary readers without distorting their historical meaning (Bamiya, 1989, p. 13).

6.3 Oral Tradition and Written Literature

One of the most distinctive features of Algerian literature and one of the most challenging for translators is its relationship to oral tradition. Many of the major Algerian writers, particularly those of Kabyle origin, grew up in communities where oral literature stories, poems, proverbs, songs was the primary form of cultural expression. This oral heritage profoundly shaped their written work, giving it a quality of voice, rhythm, and communal address that is quite different from the individualistic voice of mainstream European literature (Ibrahimi, n.d.).

Mimouni's use of a popular narrator in *L'Honneur de la tribu* is a particularly clear example of this oral dimension. The narrator speaks with the voice of the collective 'we' rather than 'I' and employs the rhetorical techniques of oral storytelling: repetition, digression, the accumulation of proverbial wisdom. Translating this voice into another language requires not only linguistic skill but a deep understanding of the oral conventions on which it draws (Mimouni, 1989, p. 30; Alloush, n. d., p. 13).

6.4 Religious and Philosophical Dimensions

Islam plays a central but complex role in modern Algerian literature. For some writers particularly those of the earlier generation Islamic faith and practice are an integral part of the cultural landscape that their novels depict. For others, particularly those writing in the post-independence era, the relationship to Islam is more ambivalent, caught between respect for its role in sustaining Algerian identity under colonialism and critique of its use as a tool of social control and political oppression. The translator must be sensitive to these nuances, avoiding both the secularist tendency to flatten the religious dimensions of the text and the pious tendency to idealize them (Shukri, 2012, p. 109).

The philosophical dimensions of Algerian literature are equally complex. Writers like Kateb Yacine and Mohamed Dib engaged seriously with existentialist philosophy, with the absurdism of Camus (himself an Algerian of French origin), and with the Marxist tradition of committed literature. These philosophical currents shape both the content and the form of their work, and the translator who is unfamiliar with these traditions may miss important dimensions of meaning (Nikiforovna, 1989a, p. 19; Bamiya, 1989, p. 13).

7. CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that translating contemporary Algerian literature involves far more than transferring linguistic meaning. Literary texts produced within the Algerian context are deeply rooted in historical experience, multilingualism, collective memory, and cultural symbolism. Consequently, translators face continuous decisions concerning the preservation or adaptation of culturally specific elements. The analysis reveals that excessive domestication may improve readability but often weakens the cultural identity of the original text. Conversely, strict foreignization may preserve cultural authenticity but create comprehension difficulties for target readers. Therefore, effective literary translation requires a balanced strategy that combines readability with cultural preservation.

Furthermore, the study confirms that translators need interdisciplinary competence extending beyond language proficiency to include knowledge of Algerian history, Amazigh culture, Arabic traditions, colonial discourse, and literary symbolism. Such competence enables translators to make informed decisions when confronting culturally embedded expressions and literary imagery.

This study examined the challenges involved in conveying cultural identity through the translation of contemporary Algerian literature. By combining theoretical perspectives from Translation Studies with textual analysis of selected Algerian authors, the research has demonstrated that literary translation is fundamentally an act of cultural mediation.

The findings support the research hypothesis that neither literal translation nor complete domestication can adequately represent Algerian cultural identity. Instead,

translators should adopt a flexible approach that combines functional equivalence with selective foreignization according to the communicative function of each cultural element.

The study also highlights the importance of preserving multilingualism, historical references, literary imagery, and culturally specific expressions, since these elements constitute essential components of Algerian literary identity.

Future research may extend this analysis through corpus-based approaches or comparative studies involving multiple target languages, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of cultural translation in postcolonial literature.

This study is limited to a qualitative analysis of selected works by major contemporary Algerian authors. It does not attempt to examine all Algerian literary production nor provide a quantitative assessment of translation strategies. Future research may employ corpus linguistics or reader-response studies to evaluate the effectiveness of different translation approaches.

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