CONFLUENCE
Journal of
Multidisciplinary Studies

# CONFLUENCE
## Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies



Vol. 2
Issue 3
2026

ISSN: 3085-5411

OPEN ACCESS

doi

Indexed in the Moroccan Scientific Journals Portal (IMIST – CNRST)

EiC Brahim Barhoun

CC BY




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial ..... **i**
**Brahim Barhoun**

## Articles:

Narratives of Resistance and Counter-Hegemony in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*: Polyphony, Intersectionality, and Hidden Transcripts ..... **1**
**Mouna Ben Haddou**

Memory Without Aftermath: Recalibrating Postmemory in Holocaust and Nakba Literature ..... **18**
**Douaa Abridaa & Sawsan Malla Hussein**

Beyond Women-as-Nation: Speculative Recoveries of the Women of Marrakesh in Saeida Rouass's *Assembly of the Dead* ..... **39**
**Chadi El Mtouni**

From Moroccan Jewish Memory to Israeli Settlement: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Palestinian Erasure in Yamit Armbrister's *One Moroccan Woman*..... **56**
**Chaimae Belahrache & Brahim Barhoun**

Moral Authority and Communal Ethics in Moroccan Folktales..... **73**
**Mohamed Rouichi**

Same *Shit*, Different Toilets: Terror, Outrage and the Cycle of Power in Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu* ..... **90**
**James Aboi Dominic & John Kwasu Katung**

A Sociopragmatic Investigation of Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* ..... **103**
**Chibuike Smart Mbarachi & Chinyere Christiana Ndeche**

The *hijra* in Arabic Media Context: A Corpus-assisted Discourse Collocation Analysis .....**117**
**Azouz Belkharraf & Zakariae Azennoud**

Analysis and Evaluation of the Translation of Qur'anic Terms: *Hajj* as a Case Study..... **133**
**Omar Ajbar**

The Affective Public Sphere: Emotion as the Engine of Media Accountability in the MENA Region.....**153**
**Brahim Elboukhari & Abdelmalek El Kadoussi**

Rival Frames: Moroccan and Algerian Media Framing of Morocco's Hosting of AFCON 2025 ..... **172**
**Omar Kouiyache**

Competency Frameworks and MOOC Design: A Framework for Language Teacher Education .....**190**
**Salma Driouach, Ahmed Ibrahimi & Bouchra Chougrani**

Augmented Reality in English Language Teaching: Enhancing Engagement, Language Acquisition, and Cultural Awareness Among Moroccan Middle School Learners.....**211**
**Mohamed Chahbi & Imane Bakkali**

## Interviews:

Realism, Sisterhood, and the Moroccan Female Voice: An Interview with Karima Ahdad .....**226**
**Imane Derrazi & Brahim Barhoun**

Memory, City, and the Poetics of the Historical Novel: An Interview with Mohamed El Ftouh on *Diwan Al-Ahali*..... **235**
**Brahim Barhoun & Zineb Duali**

What We Forget, Tales Remember: An Interview with Tahir Shah on Moroccan Storytelling.....**248**
**Inass Essrhir**

## Book Reviews:

Review of *The Last Rekkas: Chronicles of a Foot Courier in Southern Morocco*, by Aomar Boum and Majdouline Boum-Mendoza..... **254**
**Abdellatif Labkadri**

Review of *Le Trône des Illusions* (*The Throne of Illusions*), by Étienne Fakaba Sissoko .....**258**
**Niapégué Sanou**

Review of *Decolonising Approaches to Users and Audiences in the Global South: Context, Theory and Method*, edited by Tarik Sabry, Winston Mano, and Andrea Medrado ..... **263**
**El Makke Maagoul**

Review of *Handbook on Intangible Cultural Practices as Global Strategies for the Future: Twenty Years of the UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, by Christoph Wulf..... **268**
**Omar Artal**




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Editorial

## Volume 2, Issue 3 — July 2026

## *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*

This regular issue of *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* brings together twenty contributions: thirteen research articles, three interviews, and four book reviews. The research articles fall into four broad areas. Literary and cultural studies open the issue, followed by work in language, discourse, and translation, then media and communication, and finally education and technology. The ordering reflects a deliberate movement from the interpretation of texts to the study of the languages in which texts are made, then outward to the media systems that circulate public discourse and the classrooms where language is taught. Read in sequence, the contributions display the range of methods, from close reading and critical fabulation to corpus analysis, framing analysis, and mixed-methods classroom research, through which the humanities and social sciences examine culture today.

Mouna Ben Haddou opens the issue with a study of diasporic counter-narrative in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*. Drawing on Said's theory of Otherness, Crenshaw's intersectionality, Gramsci's cultural hegemony, and Scott's hidden transcripts, she argues that Lalami's polyphonic structure unsettles the myth of an inclusive American melting pot. In her account, private mourning and intergenerational memory carry political weight; the novel tells a story and, in the telling, performs an act of resistance.

Douae Abridaa and Sawsan Malla Hussein read four novels across a single mnemonic frame: Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* and Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* against Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* and Ibtisam Azem's *The Book of Disappearance*. Their question is what happens to Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory when the catastrophe it describes has not ended. Moving through objects, sites, and bodies, they argue that a shawl mediating irrevocable loss differs in kind from house keys and Ottoman land registers that underwrite a claim to return, and that Jaffa's erasure through renaming differs from an indifferent New York that merely neglects the past. Postmemory, they contend, needs recalibration rather than rejection once trauma refuses to become past, and the comparison throughout presumes asymmetry rather than equivalence between the two histories.

Chadi El Mtouni turns to Saeida Rouass's *Assembly of the Dead*, set against the 1906 Algeciras Conference and the case of the so-called "Moorish Jack the Ripper" of Marrakesh. Using Saidiya Hartman's method of critical fabulation, he examines how Rouass speculatively recovers thirty-six real murder victims whom Moroccan historiography, in Brahim El Guabli's

phrase a "gender-unaware history," had reduced to silence. El Mtouni resists both the local patriarchal negligence that deemed these women expendable and the colonialist gaze that homogenized them.

Chaimae Belahrache and Brahim Barhoun offer the first sustained standalone analysis of Yamit Armbrister's *One Moroccan Woman*. Their concept of settler countermemory names a paradox. Tamar Ben Zaken's memories of Muslim foster motherhood, Arabic sound, and shared domestic ritual in Marrakesh contest Ashkenazi racism and the Israeli erasure of Moroccan Jewish identity, yet her narrative remains complicit in the Zionist erasure of Palestine. Reading with Ella Shohat and Olivia C. Harrison, the authors follow Tamar's de-Maghrebization from Marrakesh to Kiryat Gat and insist that the novel's political value lies in its unresolved contradiction.

Oral tradition anchors the next contribution. Mohamed Rouichi reads three Moroccan folktales, "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," "The Vizier and the Chicken," and "The Tale of Hatim Tai," through an interdisciplinary lens that joins anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, and gender-attuned criticism. The tales negotiate tensions between spiritual aspiration and filial duty, articulate expectations of just kingship, and place compassion at the center of moral life.

Two articles then carry the issue to Nigeria. James Aboi Dominic and John Kwasu Katung read Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu* through New Historicism, tracing the playwright's outrage at military despots-turned-politicians and at a cycle of power in which regimes change while predation continues. Chibuike Smart Mbarachi and Chinyere Christiana Ndeche investigate Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* sociopragmatically, showing how Kilanko's contextually Yoruba and Nigerian English constructs a dual identity, indigenous and national on one side, literary and anglophone on the other. Their attention to language in literature points toward the linguistic studies that follow.

Azouz Belkharraf and Zakariae Azennoud examine the word *hijra* in Arabic newspaper discourse through corpus-assisted discourse analysis. Running three association measures in GraphColl across a specially built corpus, they map the collocational networks through which the press renders migration a social problem in one context, a youthful hope in another, a geopolitical crisis in a third. Their study also makes a case for extending largely English-dominant corpus methods into Arabic. Omar Ajbar stays with the Arabic lexicon but shifts to translation. His three-phase analysis of the Qur'anic term *Hajj*, lexical, conceptual, and contrastive, finds that the common English equivalent "pilgrimage" fails to carry the term's conceptual and ritual specificity, and he recommends foreignization when translating such terms.

Media and communication form the third cluster. Brahim Elboukhari and Abdelmalek El Kadoussi question whether the Habermasian ideal of a rational, dispassionate public sphere can serve to evaluate the MENA region. Analyzing roughly 1,200 user comments across three Moroccan cases, they propose an "Affective Public Sphere" driven by a moral economy of shared values, in which accountability lies dormant until a transgression violates something the community holds sacred, whether humanitarian grief, national identity, or cultural dignity. The digital street then erupts. Their conclusion carries a warning: the affective mobilization that gives voice to the voiceless also produces a majoritarian consensus that states can co-opt to justify censorship. Omar Kouiyache brings framing analysis to Morocco's hosting of AFCON 2025, comparing twenty-five articles from *Morocco World News* and Algeria's *El Watan*. The same tournament yields two irreconcilable stories, one of organizational success and soft power, the other of manipulation and artifice; the divergence says more about regional rivalry than about football.

The research section closes with education. Salma Driouach, Ahmed Ibrahimi, and Bouchra Chougrani analyze the structural tension between professional competency frameworks (the CEFR Companion Volume, DigCompEdu, EAQUALS, and national FLE frameworks) and the pedagogical architecture of MOOCs, proposing a four-step alignment mechanism that distinguishes competencies teachable at scale from those requiring situated practice. Mohamed Chahbi and Imane Bakkali report a mixed-methods study of an augmented reality reading activity built around Jemaa El-Fnaa with thirty Moroccan middle school learners of English. Performance gains and high engagement followed the intervention, though the authors acknowledge the limits of a short study conducted without a control group.

Three interviews follow. Imane Derrazi and Brahim Barhoun speak with novelist and former journalist Karima Ahdad about her trajectory from *Cactus Girls* to *The Other Woman*, her six a.m. writing discipline, her commitment to realism, and her reinvented Scheherazade, a woman who tells stories to save herself from herself. Brahim Barhoun and Zineb Duali interviews Mohamed El Ftouh on *Diwan Al-Ahali*, his 508-page historical novel of Tetouan, in a conversation, translated from Arabic, about what he calls the aesthetic wager of historical fiction, namely interpreting the silences of the archive without falsifying it. Inass Essrhir talks with Tahir Shah about Moroccan storytelling, the collaboration between Mohammed Mrabet and Paul Bowles, and a view of translation in which the translator does not reproduce a tale but creates the new variant that keeps it alive.

Four book reviews close the issue. Abdellatif Labkadri reviews *The Last Rekkas* by Aomar Boum and Majdouline Boum-Mendoza, a chronicle of foot couriers in southern Morocco. Niapégué Sanou assesses Étienne Fakaba Sissoko's debut novel *Le Trône des Illusions*, a satire of coups and governance in the fictional Republic of Gayma that cost its author his freedom before it cost him his country. El Makke Maagoul evaluates *Decolonising Approaches to Users and Audiences in the Global South*, edited by Tarik Sabry, Winston Mano, and Andrea Medrado, a collection that rethinks audience research beyond Western frameworks. Omar Artal reviews Christoph Wulf's *Handbook on Intangible Cultural Practices as Global Strategies for the Future*, published twenty years after the UNESCO Convention on intangible heritage.

A shared habit of mind holds these twenty contributions together. Each takes a cultural object, whether novel, folktale, headline, or sacred term, seriously enough to ask what work it does in the world. We thank the contributors, the peer reviewers, and the editorial team at *Confluence*. Special thanks go to the research laboratory LLCIS at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, whose support makes this journal possible. The issue speaks in many registers, from many places. Such plurality is no accident of the submission pile; a multidisciplinary journal exists to cultivate it.

**Brahim Barhoun**
*Editor-in-Chief*
*Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*
*Abdelmalek Essaadi University*
*July 2026*

## Disclaimer and Conflict of Interest Statement

The views expressed in the articles published in *Confluence* are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial board or affiliated institutions.

This issue includes contributions from members of the editorial team, including the Editor-in-Chief and members of the LLCIS Research Lab. All such submissions were subject to the journal's standard double-blind peer-review process and evaluated independently to ensure fairness, objectivity, and the highest standards of scholarly integrity.

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Narratives of Resistance and Counter-Hegemony in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*: Polyphony, Intersectionality, and Hidden Transcripts

**Mouna Ben Haddou**
FLSH, Mohammed V University in Rabat

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.6605

**Mouna Ben Haddou** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Mohammed V University in Rabat. She holds a PhD in diaspora and migration within the realm of literature. Her main scope of research is centered around, but not limited to, diasporic studies, gender studies, migration studies, cultural studies and research in higher education.

mouna.benhaddou@flsh.um5.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2908-4922

Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 23-05-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Narratives of Resistance and Counter-Hegemony in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*: Polyphony, Intersectionality, and Hidden Transcripts

**Mouna Ben Haddou**
FLSH, Mohammed V University in Rabat

## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* as a diasporic counter-narrative that highlights voices historically marginalized within the prevailing American cultural discourse. Drawing on Edward Said's theory of Otherness and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, alongside Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony and James C. Scott's theory of hidden transcripts, the analysis frames Lalami's novel within a wider context of Arab-American writing as a space of resistance. *The Other Americans* disrupts conventional narratives of belonging, identity, and justice by emphasizing viewpoints influenced by racial, religious, and socio-economic marginalization. The paper argues that Lalami constructs a polyphonic narrative framework that challenges singular representations of the "American experience." The novel reveals the flaws in the dominant myth of the United States as an inclusive melting pot through its variety of voices. Through Said's framework, the novel exposes the mechanisms by which Arab and Muslim identities are constructed as cultural "Others," while Crenshaw's intersectionality clarifies how gender, race, and religion interact to shape layered diasporic experiences. Scott's "hidden transcripts" manifest in Lalami's depiction of private mourning, intergenerational memory, and implicit critique, through which she uncovers the political significance inherent in human narratives. *The Other Americans* challenges cultural hegemony and reasserts narrative authority for diasporic agency by shedding light on the marginalized subjectivities. The study illustrates how Lalami's work redefines the American literary canon by affirming the validity of marginalized perspectives, hence converting diasporic fiction into a kind of cultural and political action. Consequently, the book serves as both a medium for storytelling and a mechanism of resistance, illuminating the experiences of marginalized Americans.

## KEYWORDS

**Margins**

**Other Narratives**

**Diaspora**

**Hegemony**

**Resistance**

**Hidden Transcripts**

## Introduction

Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* reexamines American culture from the disparate viewpoints of diaspora, exile and marginalization. Lalami assembles a chorus of narrators comprising immigrants, veterans, and socially marginalized individuals, consequently constructing a counter-cartography of belonging that redefines the American identity via the perspectives of those excluded from the national narrative. The novel elucidates the concept of

Contact ✉ mouna.benhaddou@flsh.um5.ac.ma

©2026

integration by demonstrating how ethnicity, religion, and coerced movement impose constraints and conditions on inclusion.

To examine these exclusions, this study draws on Edward Said's theorization of "Otherness," particularly as articulated in *Orientalism* (1978). Said argues that the "Orient" is not a geographical reality but a discursive construction produced by Western systems of knowledge and power, through which the East is represented as backward, irrational, and fundamentally different from the West (Said 2–3). This process of othering transforms cultural difference into hierarchy, establishing normative Western identity through contrast with a racialized and exoticized Other. In the American context, Arab and Muslim identities have frequently been framed through similar representational logics, especially in post-9/11 discourse. Lalami's novel interrogates precisely this mechanism, exposing how Arab-American subjects are positioned within narratives shaped by suspicion, securitization, and cultural misrecognition.

In addition, this research engages with Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, first formulated in "Mapping the Margins" (1991). Crenshaw demonstrates that systems of oppression—such as race, gender, and class—do not operate independently but intersect to create specific and compounded forms of marginalization (1244). Intersectionality therefore provides a framework for understanding how Arab-American women in Lalami's fiction experience layered exclusions that cannot be reduced to a single axis of identity. The novel dramatizes the structural complexity of diasporic subjectivity by foregrounding characters who navigate the overlapping pressures of race, religion, gender, and migration.

This study argues that *The Other Americans* transforms narrative structure into a political act. Lalami challenges Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony—the process by which privileged groups secure compliance via ideology instead of coercion—through elements such as polyphony, fragmentation, and silence (Gramsci 12). Her interlaced voices articulate what James C. Scott refers to as hidden transcripts. These mundane acts of defiance enable marginalized individuals to regain their dignity within oppressive regimes (4). The novel's structure functions as an aesthetic embodiment of resistance, converting the politics of subaltern survival into a form of literature. By placing Said's theory of othering, Crenshaw's intersectionality, Gramsci's hegemony, and Scott's hidden transcripts in dialogue, this study conceptualizes Lalami's fiction as a site where representation, power, and resistance intersect. The novel not only contests dominant cultural narratives but also exposes how identity is structured through overlapping systems of ideological control. Additionally, this research examines how *The Other Americans* employs multiple perspectives to challenge cultural hegemony and redefine belonging within the Arab-American diaspora, how the novel transforms Scott's concept of hidden transcripts into narrative form through everyday practices such as silence, prayer, and artistic expression, and how gender and religion intersect in Lalami's portrayal of Arab-American identity to produce alternative understandings of selfhood.

This analysis, grounded in Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Scott's notion of hidden transcripts, examines how Lalami reclaims narrative power for voices that have been historically marginalized. Polyphony transforms into both an artistic choice and a counter-hegemonic practice, asserting that national identity should be understood as dialogic, contested, and unfinished. The work utilizes a textual-cultural approach, combining close reading with postcolonial and cultural theory. The research explores how Lalami's characters—Maryam, Nora, and Efraín—embody several modalities of resistance: through faith, memory, and ethical examination. The novel enacts what Gramsci refers to as a "war of position" within culture (Gramsci 137). Rather than engaging in combat, it is a long-lasting struggle waged via significance, compassion, and expression. Therefore, *The Other Americans* presents an alternative narrative about the United States, prioritizing diversity over unity and dissent above silence. Lalami's multifaceted narrative illustrates that identity is not a possession but a process

of negotiation, and that opposition can effect change without being overtly vocal. Lalami transforms fiction into a platform for dialogue by providing "the other Americans" with a voice. In this sense, the excluded are not merely symbols of exclusion; they greatly contribute to the re-writing of the national narrative.

## The Sociohistorical Context: The Moroccan Diaspora and the Post-9/11 Arab-American Reality

The narrative world of *The Other Americans* unfolds within a sociohistorical moment shaped by the aftermath of September 11, 2001, a period that profoundly reconfigured the perception of Arab and Muslim identities in the United States. While Arab migration to the United States predates this event, the post-9/11 era marked a decisive shift in how these communities were represented and governed, as cultural difference became increasingly entangled with suspicion and securitization. In the years following 9/11, this shift was reinforced by security-driven policies and expanded surveillance practices that disproportionately targeted Arab and Muslim communities, further entrenching their position within regimes of suspicion and control. In this context, Arab and Muslim subjects were frequently positioned within discursive frameworks that reinforced their status as outsiders, a process that resonates with Edward Said's argument that the "Orient" is constructed through systems of representation that produce and sustain hierarchical distinctions between East and West (2–3). Rather than depicting exclusion as an abstract condition, Lalami's novel situates it within everyday life, where belonging is continually negotiated under the pressure of racialized perception.

This condition of unstable belonging is not only cultural but also structural. As Crenshaw demonstrates, systems of power such as race, gender, and class intersect to produce specific and layered forms of marginalization (1244). In the post-9/11 context, these intersections become particularly visible in the experiences of Arab-American subjects, whose identities are shaped simultaneously by ethnicity, religion, and geopolitical anxieties. *The Other Americans* reflects this complexity through characters who navigate not a single axis of exclusion, but a network of overlapping constraints that define the limits of their inclusion within American society.

Brahim Barhoun's analysis of Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel* offers a useful perspective on contemporary mechanisms of control that resonate with the post-9/11 context depicted in *The Other Americans*. He shows that certain forms of governance operate through anticipatory logic, in which individuals may be identified and managed on the basis of predicted risk rather than demonstrated action (Barhoun 2). Within this post-9/11 climate of regulation and surveillance, such mechanisms help illuminate how Arab-American subjects are frequently perceived through suspicion and pre-emptive judgment. This emphasis on anticipatory control highlights how institutional frameworks shape the conditions under which subjects are recognized, evaluated, and constrained. Read in this light, the experiences depicted in *The Other Americans* can be understood not only as instances of social marginalization, but also as shaped by forms of regulation that define and constrain subjects in advance.

The Moroccan dimension of this post-9/11 condition of racialized and conditional belonging further complicates dominant understandings of diaspora. As Ali El Abdelaoui suggests, transnational literary production challenges fixed notions of home by foregrounding mobility, plurality, and the instability of belonging across cultural spaces (19). Rather than presenting migration as a linear movement from origin to destination, such perspectives emphasize the fluid and often contradictory nature of diasporic identity. Within this framework, Moroccan diasporic experience emerges as a site of negotiation, shaped both by internal affiliations and by external processes of categorization and exclusion.

Lalami's own nonfiction further illuminates these dynamics by providing an explicit articulation of the conditional nature of belonging in the United States. In *Conditional Citizens* (2020), she reflects on how citizenship does not necessarily secure full inclusion; rather, it remains conditioned by racial, religious, and immigrant identities that structure differential access to belonging. As she observes, her experience of American life "has never been entirely secure or comfortable," underscoring how belonging is continually negotiated rather than guaranteed (Lalami, *Conditional Citizens* 6). This insight deepens the novel's portrayal of characters who inhabit an in-between space, where formal inclusion coexists with social and cultural exclusion. Taken together, these sociohistorical and literary frameworks position *The Other Americans* as a critical exploration of how identity and belonging are negotiated in the post-9/11 United States.

## Theoretical Framework

### Cultural Hegemony and the Contestation of "Common Sense"

Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony serves as the foundation for comprehending how authority functions via ideas rather than through force. In his book *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, he synthesizes that the state is the entire ensemble of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only defends its dominance, but obtains the active consent of those over whom it rules (259). Hegemony therefore lies in the ability to influence common sense—the regular, deeply unquestioned beliefs that seem customary due to their social construction. Hegemony is not a fixed consensus but an ongoing negotiation between dominant and subordinate groups. The privileged elite exerts influence not only through political dominance but also through what Gramsci refers to as intellectual and moral leadership, convincing others to embrace its beliefs and deem them universal. Civil society—encompassing educational institutions, media, religious organizations, and familial structures—serves as the pivotal arena for this conflict, as it is within this sphere that consent is cultivated and reaffirmed. Gramsci asserts that "A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before it has acquired the full 'coercive' power of the state" (12).

This insight broadens the notion of power beyond governmental apparatus to the domain of culture and discourse. Cultural production—art, literature, film—serves as a site where ideological perspectives are disputed and reinvented. Gramsci argues that political struggle must confront the entire "historical bloc," the interconnected network of cultural, ideological, and economic forces that sustain domination. For him, the war of position unfolds not only within institutions and formal political arenas but also across culture, education, and the everyday formation of common sense (137). In this framework, creative practice becomes central to political conflict. Literature, education, and media are not peripheral to politics; they form part of its extended battleground. In the American setting, the fabricated notion of exceptionalism illustrates hegemonic "common sense." It creates a manufactured cohesion of national virtue, production, and moral supremacy, while marginalizing racialized and immigrant populations in the narrative of identity. Whiteness, secular rationalism, and economic self-sufficiency emerge as unexamined standards by which "Americanness" is delineated. Stuart Hall expands Gramsci's dialectic of structure and agency to the domain of cultural identification, positing that identity encompasses both becoming and being, shaped by representation and what might be termed the politics of placement (225). This theoretical shift redefines identity from a fixed essence to a dynamic process, enabling numerous and fluid

subject perspectives. Culture, in this context, serves as both the channel and the object of ideological conflict.

Contemporary criticism of Arab-American fiction highlights the enduring influence of these ideological configurations in twenty-first-century narratives. Aymane Edouihri, in his reading of *The Other Americans*, argues that Lalami exposes the subtle mechanisms through which Arab subjects are constructed as perpetual outsiders within American discourse, thereby situating the novel within ongoing debates about otherness and disillusionment (65). Similarly, Abdellah El Boubekri contends that diasporic belonging in Lalami's fiction emerges not as assimilation but as negotiation, a process shaped by racialization and civic conditionality. These readings extend Gramsci's insight into cultural consent by showing how hegemonic "common sense" continues to define who may legitimately inhabit the national space (El Boubekri, "New Ways of Belonging" 931).

In this context, literature functions as a domain of symbolic conflict. It can either strengthen hegemonic assumptions by replicating dominant modes of representation or disrupt them by amplifying alternative epistemologies and voices marginalized from the national narrative. Barbara Harlow's influential concept of resistance literature supports this view; she describes it as a form of writing driven by a political need to turn cultural expression into a site of struggle (32).

Collectively, these theories frame cultural production as both a tool and a domain of hegemony. Gramsci's "war of position" is both political and aesthetic: a persistent effort to alter the frameworks of perception, emotion, and cognition that uphold power. The ideological value of literature lies in its ability to illuminate what common sense conceals—to articulate the contradictions that ideology presents as coherence, and to suggest novel perspectives on collective existence.

## The Politics of the Hidden Transcripts

James C. Scott's concept of hidden transcripts transformed the analysis of power by redirecting focus from explicit acts of rebellion to the nuanced, daily activities through which subaltern individuals challenge oppression. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), Scott differentiates between the public transcript—the overt display of conformity required by authority—and the hidden transcript—the offstage communication, gesture, or action through which subordinates express critique, irony, or defiance. In this context, Scott asserts, "Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (Scott xii). This theoretical framework challenges dichotomous interpretations of power as solely submission versus rebellion. It unveils a multifaceted range of resistance that functions beneath the apparent facade of social order.

Hidden transcripts arise in contexts where power structures enforce discretion. They appear via coded language, comedy, rumors, or the deliberate usage of silence, as Scott notes: "Gossip is perhaps the most familiar and elementary form of disguised popular aggression… The power to gossip is more democratically distributed than power, property, and income, and, certainly, than the freedom to speak openly" (142). These "infrapolitical" models, as later designated by Scott, are not subversive in the traditional sense; they do not seek to dismantle regimes abruptly. Instead, they are cumulative: a gradual, hidden effort that maintains dignity and memory throughout oppressive circumstances. Resistance, in this context, is not an occurrence but a practice—a persistent reaffirmation of subjectivity amid settings that seek to obliterate it.

This understanding of resistance as practice rather than spectacle is particularly visible in recent readings of contemporary Arab diasporic fiction. Amal Al-Khayyat and Yousef Awad, in their study of Lalami's narrative technique, note that even seemingly peripheral elements—such as the recurrence of weather patterns—operate as subtle narrative devices that register tension, displacement, and unease (42). Rather than foregrounding open confrontation, the novel diffuses critique across atmosphere, memory, and interiority. Such strategies resonate with Scott's conception of infrapolitics: dissent is rarely declamatory; it is embedded within texture, mood, and repetition. In this sense, Lalami's fiction does not dramatize rebellion; it renders visible the quiet labor of endurance.

Rather than equating resistance with open confrontation, this approach directs attention to the quieter adjustments and coded gestures that structure everyday experience: how individuals navigate limitations and create zones of autonomy inside the gaps of authority. Actions like silence, adherence to rituals, memory preservation, or nuanced behavioral modifications gain significance precisely due to their commonplace nature. The hidden transcript converts the mundane into rebellion, not via confrontation but through perseverance. The notion also reveals the performative aspect of power itself: the ruling class relies on public obedience to maintain legitimacy, although this performance is inherently unstable as subordinates engage in it tactically rather than authentically. Each manifestation of compliance possesses the capacity to undermine authority. Consequently, control inherently harbors the potential for its own challenge: the notion that what seems to be consent may actually disguise underlying resistance.

This ambiguity between consent and resistance has particular resonance in post-9/11 representations of Muslim and Arab subjects. As Sahar Aziz demonstrates, racialization frequently transforms religious identity into a visible marker of political suspicion, rendering everyday life a site of surveillance (7). Promise Frank Ejiofor similarly argues that Islamophobia must be understood not as episodic hostility but as a structural condition embedded in public discourse (Ejiofor). Read alongside Scott's framework, such scholarship clarifies how compliance may operate strategically within environments structured by scrutiny. What appears as silence may conceal negotiation; what appears as conformity may preserve dignity.

Subsequently, theorists in cultural and postcolonial studies, such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, expanded upon Scott's findings within the conceptual domain. Bhabha's notion of mimicry corresponds with the logic of hidden transcripts: it is "nearly the same, but not quite" (122), and thus constitutes a form of replication that unsettles authority through imperfect imitation. Likewise, Spivak's insights on the subaltern voice emphasize that silence can signify refusal rather than mere absence (307–08). In all instances, resistance resides not in shattering quiet but in redefining its meaning. The concept of hidden transcripts thus expands the realm of political imagination; it acknowledges that the contestation of hegemony transpires not only in protests or manifestos but also in gestures, rituals, and narratives. The notion reinterprets agency as the ability to signal differently—converting obedience into irony, restriction into inventiveness, and invisibility into resilience. Scott and his successors reveal the moral acuity of the disadvantaged and restore to them the capacity to narrate their own experiences through subtle acts of resistance.

Recent scholarship on *The Other Americans* extends this conversation by examining how belonging itself becomes conditional within contemporary American discourse. El Boubekri, in his book review of Lalami's *Conditional Citizens*, frames citizenship as contingent upon racial legibility ("Conditional Citizens" 231). Rachid Lamghari further demonstrates how gendered space shapes diasporic subjectivity (883). Yet these studies, while illuminating civic, spatial, and gendered dimensions of belonging, tend to privilege thematic concerns over narrative structure. What remains less explored is how Lalami's polyphonic form itself operates as a

counter-hegemonic intervention, redistributing authority across voices rather than merely representing marginality. The next section therefore shifts attention to this structural dimension of the novel's counter-hegemonic strategy.

## Close Reading

### Polyphony as Counter-Hegemony: The Refusal of a Single "American Story" in *The Other Americans*

From its first pages, *The Other Americans* challenges the notion of a singular, cohesive narrative. Nora, the first narrator, reflects: "Whenever I think about that moment, these two contradictory images come to me: my father struggling for breath on the cracked asphalt, and me drinking champagne with my roommate" (Lalami, *Other Americans* 5). This notable contrast between death and everyday existence clearly indicates Lalami's rejection of resolution and proportion. This highlights the primary conflict of the novel: the disparity between individual experience and societal apathy. The readers find themselves in a fragmented environment where the concepts of belonging and alienation are intertwined, reflecting the state of the American community as a whole. The narrative of the novel is presented through the perspectives of nine distinct narrators—immigrants, veterans, workers, and family members—each contributing a fragment of truth. No single viewpoint prevails; meaning arises instead from the interplay among multiple perspectives. This narrative structure reconfigures polyphony as a form of resistance. As Mikhail Bakhtin explains, polyphony refers to a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" that coexist within the same artistic work, none subordinated to an authorial hierarchy (6). In such a form, truth becomes dialogic rather than absolute, shaped by interaction rather than proclamation. Lalami's use of polyphony performs precisely this function. Her dispersed voices undermine the ideological uniformity that Antonio Gramsci calls "common sense," the uncritical acceptance of a dominant worldview. Lalami converts consensus into conversation by distributing narrative authority across social margins; her novel questions whether any singular "American story" can ever encompass the contradictions, silences, and multiplicities that define national identity. In *The Other Americans*, each chapter responds to, reinterprets, or adds complexity to another. Nora's grief, Maryam's faith, Jeremy's guilt, and Efraín's silence intertwine to form an intricate weave of viewpoints that collectively reveal the fractures within the nation. The novel exemplifies what Bakhtin refers to as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices" through this interplay. The reader engages actively in this dialogue, obliged to embrace multiple, at times contradictory, truths simultaneously.

Lalami's decision to divide narrative authority among a variety of characters demonstrates a profound ethical and political purpose. Through her work, she amplifies the voices of immigrants, racial minorities, and those often overlooked by society, thereby elevating storytelling to a profound act of acknowledgment. In a society where the margins are frequently discussed yet seldom acknowledged, her novel asserts that literature serves as a crucial space for justice. The process of reading transforms into a collaborative endeavor: meaning is not simply provided but constructed through active listening, inquiry, and comparative analysis. Every reader, similar to each character, must come to terms with the experience of uncertainty.

Additionally, Driss's hit-and-run becomes the novel's central point of rupture, yet *The Other Americans* pointedly refuses to grant any single narrator the authority to define its meaning. Rather than presenting the accident as a fixed event, Lalami disperses it across multiple

consciousnesses, each shaped by fear, memory, and positional vulnerability. Efraín's testimony illustrates how narrative fragmentation emerges from precarity:

> That's when I heard a car speeding toward the intersection and then a dull sound. Bump. Like that. I looked up, and the car was already making a turn onto the side street. The old man rolled off the hood and landed facedown in the gutter. And the car didn't even stop. It went on as if it had only hit a can or a plastic bottle. (Lalami, *Other Americans* 14)

The clipped syntax—"Bump. Like that"—mirrors the shock of the moment while also signaling the incompleteness of perception. Efraín does not narrate with authority; he reconstructs from fragments. The simile reducing the victim to "a can or a plastic bottle" exposes the moral numbness embedded in the act, but it also reflects how violence is rendered ordinary within public space. His hesitation to report the crime further complicates the narrative of justice: "Did you forget what happened to Araceli? … Before she knew what was happening to her, Immigration was at her door" (14). Here, the ellipsis functions not merely as punctuation but as political suspension. The pause between memory and consequence embodies the strategy of survival. Efraín's silence is not apathy; it is structured by fear. Polyphony, then, does not simply diversify perspective—it exposes the unequal risks attached to speech itself.

Nora reads her father's death as part of a broader pattern of anti-immigrant hostility, while Coleman renders it a procedural matter, his official tone flattening the emotional and political stakes into bureaucratic language. Efraín, the only direct witness, approaches the event with fear shaped by his undocumented status, knowing that visibility can be dangerous. Maryam interprets the loss through the longer history of exile and political repression that has shaped her life, carrying the grief of displacement into the American present. A.J. obscures his guilt in resentment, offering yet another distorted vantage point, whereas Jeremy filters the event through trauma, loyalty, and the complicated intimacy of his relationship with Nora. These voices do not resolve into a single, authoritative explanation; their very dissonance resists the hegemonic impulse to produce one "official" story. Nora later articulates this epistemological incompleteness when she reflects: "Maybe that's all we ever get—the parts" (257). The dash interrupts the sentence, visually enacting fragmentation. Knowledge appears cumulative and partial rather than totalizing. Polyphony therefore functions as a structural refusal of closure: the novel resists converting lived experience into a unified national narrative. By allowing competing interpretations to coexist, Lalami destabilizes the dominance of institutional narratives and redistributes interpretive power to those who are usually unheard. In this fractured chorus, polyphony becomes more than a stylistic choice—it is the means by which the novel challenges the authority of any singular, hegemonic understanding of what Driss's death signifies.

Moreover, the fragmentation of the novel, characterized by its shifts in time, tone, and voice, mirrors the dislocations inherent in the experience of diaspora. This formal instability becomes visible in Nora's reflection near the novel's conclusion: "Home was wide-open spaces, pristine light, silence that wasn't quite silence. Home, above all, was the family who loved me" (282). The repetition of "Home" followed by redefinition signals reconstruction rather than inheritance. Belonging is not asserted as stable territory; it is narratively assembled. The polyphonic design allows "home" to emerge from dialogue, grief, and memory rather than from national myth. The experience of immigrants, characterized by the processes of translation and the presence of uncertainty, fundamentally shapes the narrative itself. Memory disrupts the linear progression of time; individual suffering intertwines with shared narratives. This framework illustrates the notion that identity in exile is inherently multifaceted and never fully

realized. The multiplicity of the novel is thus not merely decorative; it serves as a formal reflection of displacement. The fragmented narrative reflects the complex experience of navigating two worlds while struggling for acceptance in both.

Lalami redefines narrative as a collective endeavor by removing absolute power from individual narrators. In her fiction, truth is consistently depicted as communal, incomplete, and open to dispute. Nora acknowledges: "Maybe that's all we ever get—the parts" (257). This acknowledgment reflects the novel's view of knowledge as a collective and incomplete pursuit. Polyphony here is not decorative multiplicity; it is a structural refusal of singular authority. The novel contests the idea that a nation can be narrated through one coherent voice. Instead, it produces a dialogic America and an ongoing conversation among citizens, immigrants, believers, skeptics, and witnesses.

The framework utilized in *The Other Americans* reexamines the notion of resistance since Lalami's resistance is not defined by explicit rebellion or ideological stances, but rather by a nuanced insistence on the coexistence of diverse truths. The novel serves as a political instrument, reallocating narrative power and converting fiction into a space where underrepresented voices express their experiences in their own languages and according to their own definitions. This approach allows *The Other Americans* to transform its form into a vehicle for political discourse. The polyphonic design contests the notion that a nation can be defined by a single voice or experience; instead, it creates a dialogic America—an enduring conversation among citizens, immigrants, believers, skeptics, and outsiders. Lalami's counter-hegemonic art is grounded in her rejection of essentialism; she highlights that understanding, similar to belonging, ought to be perpetually open-ended. By incorporating voices that have been historically marginalized, the author reconfigures the "American story" into a collective chorus instead of a singular monologue—an endeavor characterized by speaking, remembering, and listening that seeks to bridge the divides established by power dynamics.

## Subtle Dissent: Hidden Transcripts in the Margins of Everyday Life

As it was previously mentioned in the theoretical part, the hidden strategies employed by marginalized groups to maintain their dignity in the face of oppression do not directly challenge authority; rather, they gradually undermine it by fostering alternative moral frameworks, languages, and forms of solidarity. Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* emerges as a literary representation of infrapolitics—the nuanced, internal acts of self-assertion that take place implicitly without the awareness of the state, the market, and societal biases.

Lalami's novel, marked by polyphony and fragmentation, skillfully converts Scott's political actions into a literary examination of resilience. The narrators occupy the spaces between belonging and exclusion: an immigrant mother constrained by traditional gender norms; an undocumented worker who maneuvers through life with caution; a daughter who contests the idea of injustice as just coincidence. Individuals need to negotiate through what Scott describes as the "dialectic of disguise and surveillance," where their existence relies on their ability to articulate truth (14). Lalami transforms mundane actions into a means of political discourse. The simple manifestations of Maryam's religious devotion illustrate this dynamic. Early in the novel, after a public family dispute, Maryam describes how she withdraws from the escalating argument without surrendering her agency:

> For a long time after my husband died, I felt as if I were caught in a heavy fog, unable to see my way forward… my daughters started arguing about my husband's will. They

> couldn't even wait to get home to do it, they were yelling at each other in front of everyone, deaf to my pleas to lower their voices, and after a while I gave up, folded my hands in my lap, closed my eyes, and recited the Surat al-Nas, over and over again. (Lalami, *Other Americans* 74)

This portrayal of quiet may suggest a sense of submission; yet Scott underscores that some of the most effective forms of resistance operate "in disguised or culturally acceptable forms" that remain hidden beneath outward conformity (36–37). Maryam's prayer acts as a personal redefinition of her power, reaffirming her internal autonomy in a society that frequently views Muslim women with skepticism or fragility. This passage matters because it frames prayer as a chosen response to a situation where Maryam's voice is repeatedly overridden. The movement from pleading to recitation is not capitulation; it is a shift in register. She cannot control the public scene, but she can control her inward posture—"folded," "closed," "recited." The expression "over and over again" signifies not only a ritual pattern; it transforms religious recitation into an act of self-containment. Maryam's silence acquires substantial meaning within the framework of patriarchal and racialized scrutiny. By her deliberate avoidance of confrontation, she simultaneously opposes any form of imposition by her oppressors. Her faith embodies a private dialogue with the divine—an unwavering comprehension of existence. Lalami, in her depiction of Maryam, redefines prayer as a mode of counter-speech, establishing an escape within language where the individual can convey significance that surpasses oppressive influences.

Efraín, the undocumented worker, on the other hand, embodies another dimension of the hidden transcripts—what could be referred to as the language of survival. After Efraín witnesses the hit-and-run, his narration oscillates between moral clarity and survival logic, and Lalami renders that oscillation through an extended, sensory recollection rather than a neat moral statement:

> The only problem is the chain. That's what happened that night. I had to stop when the chain fell off… I got down on my knees and started draping the chain by feel… That's when I heard a car speeding toward the intersection and then a dull sound. Bump. Like that. I looked up, and the car was already making a turn onto the side street. The old man rolled off the hood and landed facedown in the gutter. And the car didn't even stop. It went on as if it had only hit a can or a plastic bottle… 'Did you forget what happened to Araceli?' I said… When they came to take her statement, they found out she didn't have her papers. Before she knew what was happening to her, Immigration was at her door. (14)

The narrative does not rush to the "lesson." It lingers on bodily labor—knees on the ground, hands "dirty," the chain restored "by feel." That slow, tactile buildup makes the collision feel like an interruption of survival itself, not merely a plot event. The line "Bump. Like that" compresses trauma into minimal speech, as if language cannot fully carry what has happened. Crucially, the Araceli memory shows why public truth-telling is unevenly distributed: the same act that signals civic responsibility for some (calling the police) becomes a deportation trigger for others. Efraín's reluctance therefore reads as an infrapolitical strategy—an ethics shaped by risk—rather than as a personal failure of courage. Every ellipsis signals uncertainty, while each instance of "I told myself" reflects an internal dialogue grappling with moral dilemmas and fear. As Scott notes, subordinate groups often develop a repertoire of dissimulation and self-protection, a set of gestures and speech strategies that allow them to endure domination without surrendering their sense of self (Scott 18). Efraín's internal monologue reflects the essence of

this culture; he employs invisibility as a means of self-defense, his language reflects the fearful traces of surveillance and scrutiny and the constant reluctance. Yet Lalami also shows that invisibility is costly: the hidden transcript does not disappear—it returns as obsessive recall, sharpening the very details Efraín tries to suppress:

> But another part of me scrupulously tracked all the mishaps and setbacks I had suffered since the night of the accident and held up the tally to me at every opportunity. The longer I refused to come forward, the longer the list grew… Perhaps memory is not merely the preservation of a moment in the mind, but the process of repeatedly returning to it, carefully breaking it up in parts and assembling them again… Several times a day, I returned to that moment on the highway, seeing it differently each time. (Lalami, *Other Americans* 126)

This passage deepens Scott's framework by revealing an interior dimension of hidden transcripts: silence does not produce peace, but repeated re-narration. The phrase "scrupulously tracked" reads like self-surveillance, as if Efraín has internalized the logic of policing. His memory "break[ing] it up in parts and assembling [it] again" echoes the novel's broader fragmentation, but here the fragmentation is psychological—an attempt to make the event survivable by reorganizing it. The result is not liberation but a growing "list" of perceived consequences, which makes his eventual disclosure feel less like sudden bravery than like a limit reached.

Efraín's eventual choice to testify to the police is not a glorious admission; rather, it represents a deliberate act of disclosure that jeopardizes partial invisibility in an effort to restore moral order—fully aware that truth, in this context, is a privilege not equally accessible. Lalami reconceptualizes, through this disclosure, political agency as the ability to determine the time and manner of one's vocalization, balancing the moral issues of truth against the strategies of survival.

The hidden transcripts in *The Other Americans* take an intellectual and ethical form through Nora, the artist-daughter who is unwilling to accept her father's death as merely natural or accidental. She insists: "I couldn't discount the arson, erase the small insults, untether the hit-and-run from the time and place in which it happened" (45), a challenge to what Scott refers to as "the official script of legitimacy." In the public transcript of American law and media, tragedies are often depoliticized and presented as isolated incidents. Nora rejects "accident" as an explanation and instead reads her father's death within a wider social pattern—a convergence of class, race, and xenophobia. In linking scattered signs, she exposes the violence hidden in claims of neutrality and resists the habit of separating events from their intersecting causes. Nora's father is a Moroccan immigrant; the incident was dismissed, but she attempted to take matters into her own hands and assert their existence. Her emphasis on sequence and context reinforces Scott's suggestion that subaltern groups must reconstruct the causal patterns behind injustice, especially when dominant narratives frame oppression as accidental or random (23). Hence, Nora's investigative drive reflects the reader's own endeavor within Lalami's multifaceted structure: to understand how individual narratives intertwine to uncover broader systemic truths. Her resistance is interpretative; she asserts that understanding itself constitutes a moral action.

In combining Maryam's devotion, Efraín's prudence, and Nora's doubt, Lalami creates a spectrum of dissent that encompasses emotional, linguistic, and intellectual dimensions. Every character in the novel speaks within what Scott describes as the tightly controlled boundaries of the public transcript, where only certain forms of expression are safe (136). Yet even inside

these constraints, they develop subtle modes of meaning. Maryam's quiet recitation becomes a way to anchor identity in faith; Efraín's reluctance and scattered ellipses register the pressure of fear and the politics of survival; and Nora's insistence on connecting events transforms personal pain into a form of critical insight. The characters' gestures create an implicit narrative of resistance that exists alongside the main storyline of the novel. Lalami encourages readers to engage with this unstated space to perceive what lies beyond the explicit dialogue that identifies power within subtle truths and internal consistencies.

Lalami's employment of a multiplicity of perspectives effectively embodies Scott's concept within the narrative structure since the novel tends to use alternating first-person chapters to reflect the fragmented and frequently conflicting voices that make up the hidden transcripts of society. Every voice contributes a dimension to the shared critique, yet they do not converge into a singular authoritative position. Instead, Lalami transforms the novel into a platform for exploring those concealed discourses that the wider community often overlooks.

At the end of *The Other Americans*, resistance transforms from a mere display of rebellion into an integral way of life for the characters. The faith of Maryam, the reluctant confession of Efraín, and the inquiry of Nora together assert the importance of narrating life according to their own perspectives. Lalami's characters may not achieve victory in the public sphere; instead, they endure in the private space, where memory, faith, and language remain unrestrained. Lalami transforms Scott's anthropological insight into a literary approach, suggesting that the most profound political stance can manifest in the subtlest ways. Hidden transcripts, in this sense, allow one to acknowledge invisibility as a form of agency and resilience as a source of power.

## Living at the Intersections: Women, Faith, and Diasporic Struggle

If the previous section examined hidden transcripts as subtle strategies of survival, this section turns to the gendered dimensions of that survival. In *The Other Americans*, women do not simply endure marginalization; they inhabit overlapping pressures of faith, migration, motherhood, and public scrutiny. Lalami renders these intersections not through ideological declaration but through intimate, embodied scenes.

Female characters in *The Other Americans* are placed in what Kimberlé Crenshaw explains as "the intersectional location of women of color," a social space where gender, race, class, and religion interact to create unique forms of marginality. Lalami does not portray intersectionality as an immovable victimhood. Instead, she frames it as a site of knowledge and resilience where alternative belonging paradigms can develop. Her women actively interpret oppression, creating a "diasporic space" where memory, faith, and resistance coexist (Brah 208). The novel dramatizes how the gendered and diasporic elements merge to create counter-narratives that challenge patriarchal and colonial power structures, especially through Maryam and Nora, mother and daughter.

Maryam's early memories of childhood in Morocco reveal a maternal rebellion that carries considerable significance. The following quote reveals a hidden history of female involvement: "Karima Ait-Yaacoub was the voice of the student movement… they put her on all the posters, after she went to prison. My mother used to say that when Karima spoke at rallies, people stopped breathing" (Lalami, *Other Americans* 49). The addition of "people stopped breathing" transforms Karima from symbolic presence into embodied force. By recalling this figure, Maryam situates herself within a lineage of dissent that predates her migration. Her present restraint in California must therefore be read not as submission but as historical adaptation; resistance has changed form, not disappeared. It also implies that Maryam's current resistance was rooted in her youth's revolutionary struggles. The reference to Karima's imprisonment

symbolizes the repercussions of telling the truth under oppressive governments but also prepares Maryam's consciousness as a moral successor. Thus, Lalami re-inscribes women into both Moroccan and transnational diasporic history. Crenshaw's framework helps clarify this dynamic: intersectionality exposes the kinds of erasure that emerge when multiple systems of oppression overlap (1244). Maryam's recollection is personal and political because it defies erasure and reintroduces women's struggle to resistance.

In her later reflection she reveals: "After our friend Brahim was arrested, I told Driss we should move to California, but he disagreed. He was still in thrall to his Marxist ideas. He said things would change. I said I didn't want to wait for change" (Lalami, *Other Americans* 52). The previous statement redefines agency: Maryam is pragmatic while Driss is ideologically strict; he adheres to political idealism while she practices survival strategies. The juxtaposition between "things would change" and "I didn't want to wait" stages a quiet ideological debate. Driss's faith lies in historical progression; Maryam's faith lies in immediate protection. The refusal "I didn't want to wait" carries understated authority. Migration becomes her strategic intervention rather than reluctant accompaniment. Her decision to emigrate, seemingly credited to following her husband, appears to be autonomous and well-considered. In this sense, Lalami twists the gendered script: Maryam's pragmatism preserves the family, not Driss's ideological fanaticism. The novel challenges the masculinist myth of revolutionary heroism by arguing that feminine resilience, which is protective, adaptive, and strategic, constitutes a form of activism. Besides, Maryam's journey shows how faith and practicality turn surrender into rebellion; her religious and cultural determination gives her strength in the American diaspora. For instance, her insistence on Islamic funeral procedures for her spouse despite governmental and social pressures is deemed an assertion, not conservatism; her refusal to blindly and forcibly assimilate asserts her right to define dignity. She adds: "He would have wanted it this way. He always said that if anything happened to him, he wanted to be buried according to Muslim custom, facing Mecca" (102). She defied well-meaning people who suggested abiding by the Western system of burial. The specificity of "facing Mecca" grounds faith in spatial orientation, not abstraction.

In insisting on ritual continuity, Maryam resists the subtle expectation that assimilation requires religious dilution. Her tone is not defensive; it is declarative. The sentence structure—short, unembellished—mirrors her clarity. In a cultural context where Muslim identity is frequently politicized, this moment reframes faith as dignity rather than defiance. Intersectionality here operates through quiet steadfastness. In this vein, religion for Maryam now signifies autonomy, not restriction, so Lalami views and employs faith as a tool for women's self-definition. Western feminists generally view Islam as a barrier to female emancipation; Maryam's religiosity, by contrast, preserves identity in exile via ancestral roots, and her calm insistence on ritual continuity challenges Orientalist notions of religious women as passive carriers of ethnic tradition.

Nora's resistance is more overt: while Maryam endures, Nora opposes patriarchy through speech and explicit expression. She recollects her mother's words: "My mother once told me I should find a nice Muslim doctor. 'It would make things easier,' she said" (178). The phrase "make things easier" reveals generational survival logic. Marriage is framed not as romance but as protection. Yet Nora hears constraint in that ease. Her resistance to prescribed belonging signals the tension between inherited caution and second-generation autonomy. Intersectionality here unfolds within intimacy: love and regulation coexist in the same sentence. Nora's refusal to pursue art, develop cross-racial and religious relationships, and challenge received truths perpetuates her mother's previous influence in a different way. However, her defiance is difficult; Lalami ironically and compassionately illustrates this dilemma. Nora's effort to define herself beyond Moroccan conservatism and American conformity demonstrates

diasporic feminism's double struggle: visibility risks bringing about exoticization. Moreover, in admitting, "I had spent so much of my life trying to leave this place, and now I was not sure where else I belonged" (279), Nora asserts that diasporic feminism could be a space filled with uncertainty. Nora's struggle is not merely against patriarchal expectation but against the instability of belonging itself. Intersectionality here is geographical and emotional: departure and attachment coexist. Unlike Maryam's rooted continuity, Nora inhabits mobility as both freedom and loss.

The intergenerational dialogue presented by Lalami reframes feminism as a diasporic negotiation, not a Western product. Maryam's endurance and Nora's expression are complementary methods in a shared female survival history; their frequent disputes over religion, marriage, and belonging show resistance's changing language over time and space. Nora expresses herself through critique and invention, while Maryam uses memory and ritual. Both women fight the linear structure that excludes women of color by ignoring their multiple identities (Crenshaw 139–67). Their diverse modes of agency—piety, art, prayer, and speech—form a feminist praxis that spans East and West, tradition and modernity. Lalami subverts religion especially in this context. Islam is typically the Otherized element against which liberal secularism defines itself in American culture. Lalami opposes this derogatory hierarchy by making Maryam, a pious Muslim woman, practice a counter-hegemonic Islam based on compassion, justice, and memory. Thus, the novel attempts to reclaim spiritual authority from colonial distortion and internal patriarchy. Nora's art reflects this agency via reconfiguration: she turns grief into art; her painting is a means of remembering, like her mother's prayer. One woman resists erasure by spiritual ritual; the other, through portrayal. The novel's primary feminist solidarity is their reluctance to forget, whether by reciting Surat al-Nas or painting the emptiness left by her father's death. Either way, Lalami's narrative merges spiritual and secular resistance as moral perseverance.

*The Other Americans* presents intersectionality as convergence rather than fragmentation: gender, religion, and race do not operate as isolated categories but intersect to shape diasporic identity in tandem. Through Maryam and Nora, Lalami moves between two female subjectivities, two modes of struggle, and two forms of belonging, allowing their differences to illuminate rather than cancel one another. Maryam's resilience is rooted in ritual continuity and embodied memory, while Nora's resistance unfolds through questioning, artistic expression, and interpretive insistence. Their trajectories demonstrate that home, memory, and selfhood are not inherited states but ongoing negotiations shaped by migration, generational tension, and cultural scrutiny. In refusing neat closure, the novel affirms that resistance is not spectacle but persistence. Faith and dissent do not follow opposing paths; they can work alongside one another as strategies for sustaining dignity within overlapping systems of racialized and gendered surveillance. By allowing both women to inhabit distinct yet interconnected forms of agency, Lalami suggests that belonging itself must remain open, dialogic, and continually reimagined.

## Conclusion

This study has argued that *The Other Americans* does more than represent diasporic marginality; it transforms narrative structure into a counter-hegemonic practice. By placing Said's theory of othering, Crenshaw's intersectionality, Gramsci's cultural hegemony, and Scott's hidden transcripts into dialogue, the analysis has demonstrated that Lalami's novel does not merely depict exclusion. It redistributes narrative authority itself. Through polyphony, fragmentation, ritual, and memory, the text resists the consolidation of a singular "American story" and instead constructs belonging as dialogic and contested.

Where much existing scholarship on Lalami has focused on themes of displacement, racialization, or civic conditionality, this study offers a structural reading. It shows how the novel's form enacts the very politics it describes. Polyphony is not decorative multiplicity; it is a deliberate refusal of epistemic centralization. Silence is not absence; it is strategy. Faith is not a leftover tradition from the past; it is agency. By grounding these claims in sustained close reading, this article demonstrates how narrative technique becomes a site of resistance within contemporary Arab-American fiction.

In engaging with recent criticism on diasporic belonging and post-9/11 representation, this study extends the discussion by foregrounding gendered and generational negotiations as integral to counter-hegemonic practice. Maryam's ritual continuity and Nora's interpretive defiance are not opposing models of feminism but interconnected responses to overlapping systems of scrutiny. The novel therefore reframes intersectionality as lived convergence rather than theoretical abstraction.

Future scholarship may build upon this approach by examining how polyphonic form operates across a broader corpus of Arab-American and Muslim diasporic writing, particularly in relation to surveillance, memory, and intergenerational transmission. Comparative studies might further explore how narrative multiplicity challenges national mythologies beyond the American context. Such inquiries would deepen our understanding of how contemporary fiction negotiates power not only through thematic content but through narrative structure.

Ultimately, Lalami's narrative in *The Other Americans* is bound through dialogue and discourse rather than forced and hegemonic ideology, her literature converts storytelling into a moral field where the voiceless articulate and the readers have a responsibility to listen. *The Other Americans* elevates the subtle expressions of resilience, redefining the political by illustrating that power is contested not only in public demonstrations, but also through the relentless determination and willingness of individuals who refuse to be marginalized.

## Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Al-Khayyat, Amal, and Yousef Awad. "The Weather as a Storyteller in Lalami's *The Other Americans*." *Ars Aeterna*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2021, pp. 36–56, https://doi.org/10.2478/aa-2021-0003.

Aziz, Sahar F. *The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom*. University of California Press, 2022.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated and edited by Caryl Emerson, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Barhoun, Brahim. "'You've Already Agreed to the Terms of Service': Surveillance Capitalism, the Data Double, and Resistance in Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel*." *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, Feb. 2026, pp. 1–15, https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss2.8670.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Bond, Johanna. *Global Intersectionality and Contemporary Human Rights*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–99.

Edouihri, Aymane. "Otherness and Disillusionment in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*." *African and Black Diaspora*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2021, pp. 60–74.

Ejiofor, Promise F. "Decolonising Islamophobia." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 46, no. 13, 2023, pp. 2863–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2181670.

El Abdelaoui, Ali. "Otherness and Unhomeliness in Two Moroccan Transnational Novels: Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Leila Slimani's *The Country of Others*." *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, Feb. 2026, pp. 16–30, https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss2.6254.

El Boubekri, Abdellah. "Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America." *African Identities*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2024, pp. 229–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2021.1969638.

---. "New Ways of Belonging in Diaspora in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*." *African Identities*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2024, pp. 926–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2022.2157244.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, pp. 225–34.

Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. Routledge, 1987.

Lalami, Laila. *Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America*. Pantheon Books, 2020.

---. *The Other Americans*. Vintage Books, 2020.

Lamghari, Rachid. "Gender Negotiation of Space in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile*." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 33, no. 7, 2024, pp. 879–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2326919.

Long, Paul, and Dima Saber. "Refugee Writing, Refugee History: Locating the Refugee Archive in the Making of a History of the Syrian War." *Refugee Imaginaries: Research Across the Humanities*, edited by Emma Cox et al., Edinburgh University Press, 2020, pp. 444–62, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474443210-032.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

---. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, 2000.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Yale University Press, 1990.

Shalabi, Ahmed, and Yousef Abu Amrieh. "Occidentalism Revisited: Insights from Contemporary Anglophone Arab Diasporic Literature." *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2024, pp. 134–45, https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v24i4.977.

Shwein, Hussein Nasir, et al. "Beyond Tokenism: A Study of Arab-American Muslim Identity, Belonging, and Social Dynamics in *The Other Americans* and *Between Two Moons*." *Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2025, pp. 233–54, https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2024-1577518.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Taşyakan, Reem Hazboun. "The Arab American Polyphonic Novel and Its Indictment of the Post-9/11 Political Agenda." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2024, pp. 119–36.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Memory Without Aftermath: Recalibrating Postmemory in Holocaust and Nakba Literature

**Douaa Abridaa and Sawsan Malla Hussein**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan
LLCIS Research Lab

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.6855

**Douaa Abridaa** is a PhD candidate at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, where she is affiliated with the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural and Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab. Her research explores the intersections of memory studies and literature, with a particular focus on narratives of collective trauma and reconciliation. She also serves as an English instructor.

douaa.abridaa@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8339-5462

**Sawsan Malla Hussein** is an Associate Professor of English Studies and Comparative Literature at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco. She holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Mohamed V, Rabat, Morocco. Her research examines representations of violence, (in)justice, and empathy in literature across a range of genres, with a particular focus on graphic narratives. Her work engages with texts that address historical trauma, environmental degradation, and the legacies of settler colonialism.

s.mallahussein@uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8003-9218

Received: 12-12-2025 Accepted: 20-03-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Memory Without Aftermath: Recalibrating Postmemory in Holocaust and Nakba Literature

**Douaa Abridaa and Sawsan Malla Hussein**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan
LLCIS Research Lab

## ABSTRACT

Memory studies has relied heavily on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory to describe how catastrophic histories reach generations that did not live through them. This article asks what becomes of that framework when the catastrophe has not ended. Reading Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* and Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* alongside Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* and Ibtisam Azem's *The Book of Disappearance*, it argues that postmemory rests on three assumptions that Palestinian literary memory unsettles: that the traumatic event has concluded, that the postgeneration stands at a remove from it, and that the labor of memory is fundamentally reparative. The analysis moves through three registers drawn from Hirsch's own architecture of transmission. At the level of the object, a shawl functions as a relic mediating irrevocable loss, while house keys and Ottoman land registers operate as counter-archival evidence underwriting claims to return. At the level of place, an indifferent New York neglects the past, whereas Jaffa undergoes administrative erasure through renaming. At the level of the body, residual injury gives way to ongoing inscription. Drawing on decolonizing trauma scholarship, settler colonial theory, and clinical work on continuous traumatic stress, the article contends that postmemory requires recalibration rather than rejection, and that Sa'di and Abu-Lughod's account of a doubling of memory and postmemory indicates one route. Throughout, the comparison presumes asymmetry rather than equivalence between the two histories.

## KEYWORDS

**Postmemory**

**Nakba**

**Holocaust**

**Marianne Hirsch**

**Settler Colonialism**

## Introduction

Modern and contemporary scholarship has devoted sustained attention to questions of identity and trauma through the lens of memory. This scholarly engagement has established memory as a productive analytical framework for examining histories and ongoing realities of violence, dispossession, and trauma. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory emerged from attempts to theorize the intergenerational transmission of Holocaust memory, accounting for how subsequent generations inherit collective traumatic memory through photographs, storytelling, and affective traces. The concept has since been extended to other histories of collective violence, including the Palestinian Nakba, where it has informed analyses of cultural and literary representations of inherited trauma. Yet the conditions under which Jewish and Palestinian postmemory take shape remain fundamentally different. Jewish literary postmemory emerged in the aftermath of the Holocaust, whereas Palestinian literary postmemory continues to develop in the context of ongoing displacement, occupation, and

Contact ✉ douaa.abridaa@etu.uae.ac.ma ✉ s.mallahussein@uae.ac.ma
©2026

settler-colonial violence. This distinction complicates any universal application of postmemory as a theoretical framework, raising questions about how inherited memory is produced, transmitted, and mobilized across different historical and cultural contexts, particularly those marked by unresolved rupture and continuing violence. Through a connective reading of Jewish and Palestinian literary memory, this article examines how narration, locality, and resistance operate across distinct cultural and mnemonic contexts. It argues that, although the two traditions share important mnemonic structures, their divergent historical conditions expose both the possibilities and the limits of postmemory as a transcultural framework.

This article employs postmemory to study the relational and literary connections between Holocaust and Nakba memory, connections shaped by historical and political entanglements. To avoid universalizing culturally specific trauma, utilizing postmemory as a framework is contingent on the active recognition of the historical, political, and cultural factors that delineate the distinct ways in which collective memory is recalled and transmitted within different communities. In her conceptualization of postmemory, Hirsch describes the inheritance of traumatic memory as a transmission process driven by familial stories, photographs of survivors of trauma, as well as through the affective engagement of the postgeneration. Departing from Hirsch's model, this study reexamines her premise of historical distance to include alternative forms of trauma resulting from unresolved or ongoing violence and displacement. This reevaluation is founded under the assertion that postmemory operates differently when it addresses contexts shaped by circumstances of unsettled conflict. Commonly referenced as the Nakba, the 1948 forced displacement of Palestinians from their land is often invoked to explore the persistent state of spatial restriction and embodied experience that blurs the lines between lived memory and mediated recollection. In the Palestinian literary context, the Nakba is synonymous with the continuous plight of Palestinians as it represents the inception of their collective loss of land and self-determination.

The influence of the Holocaust on memory scholarship is clear in its orientation, which centers archives, absences, and belatedness as points of focus. It presents itself in the archival backdrop of Jan and Aleida Assmann's concept of cultural memory, in the commemorative turn described through Pierre Nora's configuration of the modern memory boom, as well as in Hirsch's explicit ambition to utilize postmemory as "a form of repair" (6). The Holocaust's centrality to Jewish postmemory is marked by the aftermath of loss and its residual trauma. By contrast, Palestinian postmemory outwardly displays a political consciousness that anchors embodied traumatic recollection as a vehicle of resistance, rather than as a form of passive representation or as a means toward closure. In order to account for these divergent conditions, this article draws on theories of collective and cultural memory alongside notions of Palestinian embodied memory to study the distinct utility of postmemory in the representation of the Holocaust and the Nakba in Jewish and Palestinian literature. Through a connective reading of Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*, Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*, and Ibtisam Azem's *The Book of Disappearance*, this article highlights the role of literature as a site where collective memory is not only represented but also actively reshaped, contested, and negotiated. Going beyond a consideration of postmemory as shared trauma, this article also underlines the inherent asymmetry characterizing stakes of memory across the two distinct histories of violence and trauma.

Scholarly work on postmemory and the inheritance of trauma has been developed to account for the aftermath of collective calamity. Foundational authors such as Marianne Hirsch, Dominick LaCapra, and James Young engage with the Holocaust through an attention toward questions of transmission, representation, and the materialization of memory (93; 220; 12). These contributions echo Maurice Halbwachs's critical articulations on the social dimension of

the process of recollection, while paralleling related endeavors that expand on concerns of intergenerational transmission, archival traces, and affective engagement (27). Comparably, scholarship on Palestinian collective memory, with the Nakba at its center, has been profoundly shaped by the critical interventions of scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Ahmad H. Sa'di, Elias Khoury, Nur Masalha, and Anaheed Al-Hardan, alongside engagements with Western memory theory. Authors engaging with Palestinian collective memory diligently challenged the fixed temporality of the Nakba by foregrounding its continuity. Elias Khoury addresses this concern when he writes that "Memory can be a trap, and the *nakba* as only a memory is the biggest trap that can mislead rational analysis of the Palestinian present" (E. Khoury 263). Cautioning against the erasure of the ongoing structural violence against the Palestinian people, he repositions the events of 1948 as the underlying condition of the persistent present-day conflict, not as mere memory, but as an enduring reality that exemplifies the staticity of the Palestinian experience. Masalha extends this line of argument throughout *The Palestine Nakba*, insisting that the catastrophe be written from below, through oral history and subaltern narration, precisely because official historiography has proven structurally incapable of registering it. Despite scholarly consensus regarding the factual continuity of the Nakba, studies utilizing the framework of postmemory to examine Palestinian memory often mobilize the concept without sufficient interrogation of its temporal assumptions or its distinct origin as a Holocaust-centric framework. These tensions, while at times acknowledged, are rarely fully developed or systematically addressed. Failure to confront these concerns not only affects our ability to properly explore Palestinian inherited memory, but also hinders prospective attempts at studying the Holocaust and the Nakba side by side.

Scarce endeavors have been made to mnemonically connect the Holocaust and the Nakba due to concerns of flattening their historical specificity or marginalizing the distinct human tragedy of the Holocaust. Yet a number of scholars challenged these assumptions by presenting novel perspectives that promote memory's productive nature. In one of his articles, Michael Rothberg utilizes his framework of multidirectionality to examine Warsaw and Gaza as locations of traumatic memory. Rothberg argues that public memory is shaped by "transcultural borrowing, exchange, and adaptation," qualities that render distinct collective memories dependent on one another in matters of articulation ("From Gaza to Warsaw" 524). Similarly, in *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch devotes a section of her study to a reading of Ghassan Kanafani's *Return to Haifa* alongside Holocaust literary texts, highlighting the role of memory objects in narratives of return. (206). A more in-depth analysis of the parallelism of these two historical events was contributed by Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg in their ground-breaking book *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History*. Bashir and Goldberg trace both the Holocaust and the Nakba to European colonialism, as they argue that the two calamities are related through their status as consequences of "modern political violence created by the convergence of nationalism, imperialism, orientalism, and colonialism" (14). The authors maintain the distinction of the two national narratives while echoing Rothberg's sentiment on transcultural borrowing, as they highlight the similarity of the syntax and grammar used to frame each of the two narratives. Additionally, Avraham Sela and Alon Kadish expand on the parallelism between Israeli and Palestinian national narratives by examining the arcs that shape their development. The two authors describe the Israeli national narrative to be marked by themes of destruction, redemption, Holocaust, rebirth, exile, and return (6). Comparably, they trace the Palestinian national narrative through Nakba and defeat, rebellion, resistance, exile, and desire for return (6). These parallelisms further solidify Rothberg's claim of the transcultural dialogue intrinsic not only to collective memory, but to national narratives as well.

Two more recent contributions extend this connective work in directions that bear on the present study, and one of them requires the article to qualify its own premise. Nadim Khoury proposes postnational memory to name a mode of deliberation that extends the communicative bounds of remembrance beyond national membership and disrupts the territorialization of memory along national lines. Where nationalism seeks congruence between memory and territory, Nadim Khoury argues, joint deliberation on the Holocaust and the Nakba unsettles that congruence. Nawal Musleh-Motut pursues a comparable aim ethnographically rather than theoretically, working with Palestinians and Israelis in Canadian diasporas whom she identifies as belonging to the Holocaust and Nakba postmemory generations, and using vernacular photographs to prompt exchange between them. Her governing distinction, that participants come to connect rather than compare their histories of suffering and exile, states an ethical commitment this article shares. Musleh-Motut's study also complicates any suggestion that postmemory as a field has remained indifferent to Palestine, since Hirsch herself has publicly endorsed the project. That endorsement is worth registering rather than passing over. What it indicates, however, is engagement at the level of dialogic ethics and method: postmemory extended to a new set of participants and a new archive of photographs. What has not followed from it is a revision of the framework's temporal architecture, which continues to presume that the catastrophe being transmitted lies behind the generation transmitting it. That architecture is what the present article examines.

Several further interventions deserve particular attention here, since each approaches the question this article poses and arrives at conclusions it must contend with. The most direct is Wael Salam's, who has written twice on *Mornings in Jenin* and whose argument runs close to the one advanced below. Salam contends that Palestinian memory in Abulhawa's novel operates as non-violent resistance and political claim rather than as passive symptom, and that reading such literature through trauma theory serves to decolonize the theory itself. In a companion essay he presses the temporal point directly, arguing that Palestinian memories are "both persistent and ongoing" (95) and that for characters who remain displaced, "their memories of the Nakba never become a past because they are still displaced, and danger is still lurking" (102). Salam's formulation of Amal's condition as governed "not by a mere past, but rather by a past-in-the-present" (109) names with unusual economy what the present article traces across four novels. Two things distinguish the study that follows. Salam works within Palestinian American fiction and reads Abulhawa alongside Alyan; the present article sets Palestinian narratives against Jewish ones in order to locate the divergence structurally rather than to establish it by assertion. And where Salam addresses trauma theory broadly, the target here is postmemory specifically, whose assumptions about generational position differ from those of the Caruthian model and require separate accounting. Salam's own observation that Abulhawa's novel "draws a parallel between Holocaust survivors and Nakba survivors" indicates that the comparative frame is not imposed from outside but already at work in the primary text.

Ronit Lentin's *Co-memory and Melancholia* examines Israeli commemorations of the Nakba and proposes "co-memory" to name a remembrance undertaken by those positioned on the far side of the injury, a formulation that unsettles any assumption that postmemory belongs securely to the descendants of victims. More recently, Layla AlAmmar has argued that Palestinian cultural production generates what she terms "postmemorial absence," a condition in which the perpetual activation of a traumatic past forecloses meaningful inhabitation of the present and suspends the formation of identity (1–3). This article shares AlAmmar's conviction that postmemory functions differently when trauma refuses to recede into the past. However, whereas AlAmmar locates in Palestinian postmemory a burden and a sense of evacuation, the

readings developed here identify, alongside that burden, a generative and consciously political mode of memory work. The novels examined here do not merely register the cost of an unfinished catastrophe. They put inherited memory to work as an instrument of claim-making. This is a difference of emphasis rather than of kind, and holding both accounts in view yields a fuller picture than either does alone.

Despite the significance of these contributions, the tendency to study the Holocaust and the Nakba in isolation still persists. This is in part due to the distinct conditions of the Palestinian Nakba, which continue to challenge the framework of postmemory through tensions marked by issues of continuity and political asymmetry. The underexplored gap in the theorization of the framework of postmemory across historically asymmetrical contexts of violence remains a core concern in the development of connective studies of Holocaust and Nakba memory. This is not merely a disciplinary oversight but rather a symptom of a theoretical inadequacy that fails to connect postmemory's presumptions of historical aftermath and temporal distance to the Palestinian mnemonic context marked by continuity and cultural resistance. This article contributes to this gap by challenging the conceptual limitations of the framework of postmemory through a connected literary exploration of the representation of Holocaust and Nakba memory in Jewish and Palestinian works of fiction. By examining key narrative moments in each of the four novels, this article argues that postmemory serves as a productive, yet asymmetrical, instrument for the analysis of violence and trauma across different and uneven geopolitical locations.

The comparative framework adopted here is guided by a shared set of formal preoccupations across the four novels, making comparison meaningful rather than merely juxtapositional: each stages memory transmission within a familial frame, each assigns interpretive weight to material objects and urban space, and each registers trauma at the level of the body. *The Shawl* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* are both American Jewish narratives written by authors with no direct experience of the camps, which situates them squarely within the postmemorial and secondhand relation that Hirsch describes. *Mornings in Jenin* and *The Book of Disappearance* were composed decades after 1948 by Palestinian writers positioned differently in relation to it, Abulhawa in diaspora and Azem within the geography of the rupture. The comparison is not one of equivalent suffering, and nothing in what follows should be read as such. It is a comparison of mnemonic form: of what memory is asked to do in each case, and of what the asking reveals about the framework used to describe it. The analysis moves through three registers, objects, sites, and bodies, that correspond to Hirsch's own architecture of transmission. Reading the two sets of novels through the same categories is what allows the divergence between them to appear as a structural feature rather than an incidental one.

This article is divided into four sections. The first provides a detailed exploration of the framework of postmemory and addresses the tensions that result from its application in the Palestinian context. The second examines the shifting role of memory objects from archival relics to physical evidence in *The Shawl* and *Mornings in Jenin*. The third centers on the examination of the urban landscape in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and *The Book of Disappearance* as a space where the past is either ignored or actively erased. The fourth draws on all four novels to discuss the presence of corporeal memory between embodied remembering and recursive violence. The conclusion synthesizes these findings by connectively situating the two sets of narratives in an open dialogue marked by shared mnemonic strategies, structural limitations, and points of divergence.

## The Framework of Postmemory and its Limits

The quality of post-ness that characterizes Hirsch's theorization of postmemory arises as a result of engagement with the aftermath of calamity. Absence frames the mnemonic transmission process as offspring navigate the intergenerational trauma of their parents by confronting their verbal and non-verbal memory accounts. Hirsch highlights the role of photographs, narratives, and memory objects in bridging the gap between lived and mediated experience, as she describes the workings of postmemory alongside notions of projection and imagination (5). Establishing postmemory as a creative process led by imaginative investment provides a functional framework for exploring the mnemonic link that the postgeneration have toward their parents' past, as well as the literary and artistic productions that sought to represent the residual trauma left by a looming collective catastrophe. While Hirsch's postmemory has been a foundational theoretical instrument in the examination of inherited memory, its conceptual assumptions of aftermath and temporal distance require closer scrutiny.

Postmemory assumes temporal closure through its focus on the residual trauma caused by the conclusion of a past event. Hirsch situates the postgeneration as a central subject of study and orients her theory in representation over embodiment, inheritance over lived experience, and repair over loss. This conceptualization allows for the exploration of the unique perspective of a postgeneration that seeks to decipher and mediate the absence caused by an imposing past. Through its focus on the aftermath of trauma, postmemory privileges the ethical representation of an inaccessible past, which renders mediated forms of memory, such as photographs and material objects, crucial for its intergenerational transmission process. Postmemory's conceptual assumptions situate it within a theoretical tradition of memory studies that equally relies on temporal distance for the articulation of memory. It parallels similar assumptions made by Halbwachs, Jan and Aleida Assmann, Nora, and Young, which consider aftermath to be a condition for collective and cultural remembering. For instance, Jan and Aleida Assmann's study of the influence of institutionalized memory in shaping national and cultural identity, as well as Nora's commentary on the succession of sites of memory as a result of the disappearance of lived memory, echo Hirsch's formulation of a postmemory that materializes through temporal distance and belatedness (Assmann 9; Nora 7). These articulations delineate a clear progression that views memory as the outcome of the culmination of a lived experience. Much of the same logic is applied by leading scholars in trauma theory, a field indispensable to the development of postmemory's conceptual framework. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as "the narrative of a belated experience" that recurs through fragmentation and displacement (7). Comparably, LaCapra explores his concepts of "acting-out" and "working-through" as distinct patterns of behavior for processing a past traumatic event (59). Both Caruth and LaCapra provide critical perspectives that portray trauma as the ongoing consequence of a lived experience that defies assimilation while continuing to intrude on the present. The two authors respectively examine the long-term effects of trauma that can be traced to specific events in the past, which orient their work within a fixed temporality.

The critique advanced here is not unprecedented, nor is it presented as such. Over the past two decades, trauma studies has subjected its Eurocentric foundations to sustained critical scrutiny, and the implications of that interrogation extend directly to postmemory, even when the concept itself is not explicitly invoked. Roger Luckhurst, for instance, argues that trauma theory, in its inattention to political conditions, "shockingly fails to address atrocity, genocide and war" (Luckhurst 22). Writing during the same period, Rothberg questions whether trauma, in its then-current formulation, "provides the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world" ("Decolonizing" 224). The most systematic

articulation of this critique, however, appears in Stef Craps's *Postcolonial Witnessing*, which argues that the field's founding texts have established a hegemonic paradigm that must be challenged if trauma theory is to fulfil its ethical promise. For Craps, this requires bringing the social and historical conditions that shape suffering back into analytical view (Craps 2–4). Irene Visser traces the implications of this critique for literary studies through Katherine Baxter's observation that the dominant paradigm's emphasis on individual injury "potentially closes off other modes of presenting trauma," including those that foreground collective experience, protracted violence, and political struggle (qtd. in Visser 109). Visser extends this argument by insisting that resistance and resilience should be understood not as individual responses but "as part of a communal process of living and working through trauma" (Visser 108). It is this insight that bears most directly on the present study. If postmemory is conventionally understood as a mode of repair undertaken by descendants in relation to a traumatic past, its explanatory force becomes less certain when trauma remains communal, ongoing, and politically consequential.

Clinical research on protracted violence supplies an unexpectedly precise vocabulary for what the literary framework lacks. Gillian Eagle and Debra Kaminer note that prevailing conceptualizations of traumatic stress "retain the assumption that traumatic experiences have occurred in the past," and they propose continuous traumatic stress to describe the position of populations inhabiting conditions of "realistic current and ongoing danger" (85). Their account isolates four features that distinguish such conditions: the pervasiveness of the threatening context, the location of the stressor in the present and future rather than the past, the difficulty of discriminating real from anticipated danger, and the absence of functioning protective systems (85). Each of these bears on the mnemonic situation this article describes. Where danger is anticipated as well as remembered, the temporal partition on which postmemory depends does not hold. A parallel formulation reaches literary criticism through feminist psychology. Laura Brown's concept of insidious trauma, developed to name the traumatogenic effects of oppression that operate below the threshold of spectacular violence, has been taken up by Ann Cvetkovich and, more recently, by Kaisa Ilmonen, who observes that such formulations compel critics "to move beyond medicalized articulations" of injury and to attend to harm that is structural and quotidian rather than punctual (177). Samah Jabr pushes this line of thinking further from within clinical practice itself. Drawing on her psychiatric work in the occupied territories, she argues that Western trauma models pathologize normal responses to abnormal conditions and insists that Palestinian resilience operates not despite ongoing violence but through it (Jabr 12). For Jabr, the catastrophe is not a condition to be lived—a distinction that echoes Ilmonen's call to move beyond medicalized articulations of injury and that anticipates the literary analysis developed below (34–36). Postmemory was not built to register injury of this kind. Its exemplary objects, the photograph and the surviving heirloom, presuppose a rupture whose edges can be located.

If continuous traumatic stress names the phenomenology, settler colonial theory names the mechanism. Patrick Wolfe's formulation has become the standard reference: settler colonizers, he writes, "come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event" (388). Elimination, in his account, functions as "an organizing principal of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off (and superseded) occurrence" (388). The relevance to the present argument is direct and, in Wolfe's own text, explicitly Palestinian. He identifies renaming as "central to the cadastral effacement/replacement of the Palestinian Arab presence," and he cites Mark LeVine's assessment that Jaffa "has had to be emptied of its Arab past and Arab inhabitants in order for architects to be able to reenvision the region as a 'typical Middle Eastern city'" (388–89). Setting Wolfe's structure alongside Hirsch's framework exposes an incompatibility that is temporal before it is political. Postmemory presupposes an event that has ended and a generation positioned after it. Settler colonialism, as Wolfe describes it, has no after. What

follows from this is not that postmemory becomes inapplicable to Palestinian material, but that its central terms require redefinition when they travel. The postgeneration is not, in this context, a generation that came after. It is a generation that came into the middle.

As a framework, then, postmemory becomes unstable when its underlying assumptions of temporal distance are challenged by conditions of ongoing structural violence and displacement. Contexts of continuous or recursive violence disrupt postmemory's fundamental premise of the distinction between past and present, as well as generation and postgeneration. Scholars writing about the Palestinian Nakba have repeatedly demonstrated the continuous nature of the events of 1948 by exploring their enduring legacy. Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod describe the Nakba as "the creator of an unsettled inner time" that fragments and structures Palestinian identity and history (5). Similarly, Diana Allan applies the term "past continuous" to portray the Palestinian experience of an ongoing Nakba that persists far beyond its temporal boundaries (1). In the Palestinian context, inherited memory is further disrupted by developing conflict and violence, which leads to prevailing tensions between a continuous past and a stagnant present. These tensions stretch postmemory's claims of distance and belatedness by effectively blurring the line between notions of witnessing and experiencing. Hirsch's core theorization regarding the process of intergenerational memory transmission, alongside her analysis of familial dynamics and mnemonic objects, remains essential for the exploration of inherited memory. However, under conditions of continuous violence, these elements require critical adjustments so that they may account for both absence and presence. Palestinian postmemory does not center on the representation of absence or the reparation of trauma; it echoes the ongoing presence of the Nakba through embodied and lived experience. This crucial distinction unsettles Hirsch's framework since it portrays the body as more than a receiver of inherited memory, but rather as a site for active inscription and resistance.

There is, moreover, a formulation already available within Palestinian memory scholarship that anticipates much of this argument, and it appears in a text that has become foundational to the field. Writing of the descendants of 1948, Sa'di and Abu-Lughod observe that ongoing displacements and personal encounters with racism "fire this generation to identify with the 'imagined community' of Palestinians through a doubling of memory and postmemory" (21). The phrase repays attention. Doubling is not succession. Hirsch's architecture depends on a relay in which memory belongs to one generation and postmemory to the next, and the ethical and interpretive work of the second consists in bridging a gap the first cannot close. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod describe instead a simultaneity, a generation that inherits an account of catastrophe and accumulates its own direct experience of the same structure of violence, holding both at once. What this article contributes is a sustained literary demonstration of that doubling, traced through the objects, sites, and bodies of four novels, and an assessment of what it costs postmemory as a framework.

One qualification is necessary before proceeding, and it guards against a distortion that a comparative argument of this kind can easily produce. To describe Palestinian memory as continuous is not to describe it as uniform. Al-Hardan's fieldwork among Palestinians in Syria demonstrates precisely the opposite, tracking how the meaning of the Nakba has shifted across generations, across political affiliations, and under the pressure of subsequent catastrophes, and challenging what she identifies as the nationalist assumption that memories of 1948 are static and commonly held. Nothing in the following analysis should be taken to posit a singular Palestinian mnemonic subject. The novels examined here are two texts among many, positioned differently in relation to diaspora and to the geography of the rupture, and the claims advanced on their basis are claims about a mnemonic tendency rather than about a people.

## The Mnemonic Object: From Relic to Proof

Mnemonic objects play a prominent role in the inheritance of memory by materializing the past in the present and evoking absence through presence. Marianne Hirsch bestows great significance on memory objects, particularly photographs and visual material culture, as a core element in her study of Jewish postmemory. Heirlooms, clothing items, and personal objects trigger mental and sensory recollection of past experiences, essentially serving as portals to the past. For survivors of trauma, memory objects are relics linked to vivid recollections and unresolved emotions. They maintain a kindred mnemonic value to the postgeneration through a function in mediating past familial and collective episodes that predate their birth. Mnemonic objects carry different meanings and tackle distinct concerns across divergent temporal and political contexts of collective trauma. Hirsch explores the role of objects as "points of memory" that act as spatial and temporal markers for the past (61). Utilizing Roland Barthes's concept of the punctum, Hirsch examines the symbolic quality of memory objects that allows for the intersection between the past and the present, and establishes a connection between viewer and image (47). This connection grants the postgeneration access to imaginatively inhabit and mnemonically conjure the lived experiences of previous generations. A clear pattern materializes upon the examination of the utility of mnemonic objects across distinct literary contexts, which reveals a stark contrast between the way these objects operate under diverse cultural and political conditions. In literary texts centering on the Holocaust, memory objects often function as relics that aid in the preservation of the past or the mediation of its residual trauma. Conversely, Palestinian literature features memory objects as concrete evidence of the right of return and desire for self-determination, thereby functioning as a form of mnemonic resistance against forces of erasure. The distinct roles that memory objects occupy within different literary traditions directly reflect the temporal, cultural, and political stakes intrinsic to each collective trauma.

Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* is a significant literary piece that engages in postmemorial work through its exploration of motherhood, survival, and loss in a post-Holocaust void. Ozick introduces the shawl as a central mnemonic object through which Rosa mediates the loss of her infant daughter, Magda, who was killed in the concentration camps. As a personal object used to shelter Magda from the bleak reality of the camps and conceal her presence from the guards, the shawl functions as an extension of her being. It mediates the loss of Magda by acting as a stand-in that triggers retrospective recollections in light of present affective needs. Rosa proclaims it a "magic shawl," capable of conjuring up visions of her daughter in various stages of her life (5). Adhering to Hirsch's model, Rosa utilizes the shawl to mnemonically imagine the past and mourn the loss of her daughter. The events of the novel take place years after the end of World War II, which further situates it within postmemory's characteristic state of belatedness. Within the confinement of a safe but hollow life in Florida, Rosa clings to the shawl for remnants of a past that hosted her youthful enthusiasm, promising potential, and beloved daughter. Trauma intersects with nostalgia, prompting her to insist that survivors of the Holocaust have three lives, "The life before, the life during, the life after" (58). The shawl allows Rosa to traverse the temporal limitations separating the fragmented sections of her life, structuring a mode of recollection that sustains her denial of her daughter's death. Ozick portrays this memory object as a relic of a forgotten world; Rosa ardently performs a ritual to unleash its mnemonic power by touching its texture, inhaling its scent, and kissing its surface (31–32, 62). Sensory memory and imagination collaborate to trigger visual illusions of Magda that help Rosa conjure visions of her as a wealthy doctor and a professor of Greek philosophy (35, 39). As a relic, the shawl functions to preserve Magda's memory, sustain Rosa's attachment, and archive the tragedy that led to her premature death. It represents absence

through presence, thus foregrounding the belatedness of the Holocaust and the finality of its aftermath.

The temporal logic of Ozick's novella deserves closer attention, since it is precisely this logic that the Palestinian texts will disturb. Rosa's ritual is efficacious only because Magda is irrecoverable. Were there any prospect of the daughter's return, the shawl would function as an aid to search rather than as an instrument of conjuring, and Rosa's imaginative labor would be redirected from the past toward a future. The object's mnemonic power is constituted by the closure of the event it commemorates. The end of the novel emphasizes the retrospective nature of postmemory as Rosa stoically proclaims "Magda was away," a declaration that serves to signal the completion of her ritual of worship, the culmination of Magda's life, and the climax of the narrative (70). By means of the mnemonic object, the narrative signals an imaginative turn where memory is utilized to mourn substantial loss and transform the past to fit the affective needs of the present. What Hirsch's framework describes with real precision is this operation: a past that is finished, an object that mediates it, and a subject whose labor is interpretive rather than instrumental.

Conversely, in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*, mnemonic objects such as house keys and property deeds perform a concrete and political rather than symbolic function. Abulhawa explores the comprehensive transmission of memory and material culture to the "heirs" of a small pastoral village in Palestine at the cusp of an ongoing Nakba (35). Unlike Rosa's shawl, the mnemonic objects represented in *Mornings in Jenin* transcend their retrospective function in order to fulfill a more pressing prospective purpose that anchors the Palestinian claim to the land and right of return. These mnemonic objects are not merely symbols of a lost home, but rather factual evidence of ownership and belonging. Inscribed in these items are the political claims of a territorial discourse that fuels resistance, allowing them to function as counter-archives. Through the lens of sensory memory, Abulhawa describes the material presence of "the iron keys" and "the yellowed property deeds" by evoking their phantom weight and faded hue (140). In the novel, house keys and property deeds are intergenerationally inherited in hopes of reclaiming what has been lost, allowing these mnemonic objects to bear a legitimacy capable of tangible intervention that can facilitate conditions for accountability and justice. The claim to the land, history, and national identity takes shape through material items and vivid mnemonic episodes that solidify the ongoing state of systematic violence and dispossession. It materializes in moments big and small throughout the narrative: the characters' profound attachment to the olive groves and the fruits of their harvest, the cultural songs of the "nye" followed by the dancing of the "dabke," as well as the episodic and sensory memory of the homeland (46). For the Palestinian characters in the novel, material objects and oral memory are a defense mechanism against the awareness that they were "slowly being erased from the world. from its history and from its future" (48–49). The array of ownership documents in their possession, "the large iron keys …, the crumbling land registers issued by the Ottomans, the deeds from the British mandate," all serve as legal and concrete proof of their claims to the land (35). As active instruments of political agency and resistance, these mnemonic objects represent legally binding proof of the collective dispossession of Palestinians as they maintain a factual link to contested geography and occupied ancestral homes.

Abulhawa places this bequest immediately after a sentence that theorizes the novel's own temporality, and the juxtaposition is not incidental. In "the sorrow of a history buried alive," she writes, "the year 1948 in Palestine fell from the calendar into exile, ceasing to reckon the marching count of days, months, and years, instead becoming an infinite mist of one moment in history" (35). The year does not recede into the past. It exits chronology and persists as atmosphere, a condition the novel figures spatially rather than temporally, as mist rather than

as distance. Read against that sentence, the inheritance that follows cannot be a bequest from a closed era, since the era in question has not closed. Equally telling is the grammar of the bequest itself, which strings the iron keys, the Ottoman registers, the Mandate deeds, "their memories and love of the land," and "the dauntless will not to leave the spirit of forty generations trapped beneath the subversion of thieves" along a single undifferentiated series (35). Documentary instruments and affective dispositions arrive in the same breath and carry the same grammatical weight. Hirsch's postmemory holds these registers apart, assigning the material object the task of mediating an affect that cannot pass directly between generations. Abulhawa's syntax declines the separation, and in declining it makes the novel's own theoretical claim: what descends to the postgeneration is neither document nor feeling but an unbroken obligation.

The counter-archival function of these objects merits emphasis, since it marks a genuine departure from the model of transmission Hirsch describes. Masalha's argument that the Nakba must be narrated from below, through oral history and the testimony of the dispossessed, rests on the premise that official archives were constituted through the same processes that produced the dispossession. Where the archive is itself an instrument of erasure, the objects that survive outside it acquire an evidentiary weight they would not otherwise carry. Brigitte Herremans has recently made a comparable case for Palestinian literary writing as a form of informal archive that emerges "from below, often in response to silences," and that operates as counter-hegemonic documentation rather than as commemoration (97). Abulhawa's keys and deeds sit precisely at this juncture. They are simultaneously affective heirlooms and documentary instruments, and the novel refuses to resolve them into one or the other. The Ottoman land registers and Mandate deeds are objects of longing, certainly, but they are also, in a quite literal sense, title. Hirsch's punctum registers the first of these functions and has no apparatus for the second.

Mnemonic objects fulfill different functions across the two novels due to varying underlying conditions of residual and ongoing trauma. In Ozick's portrayal of the aftermath of the Holocaust, the shawl acquires a symbolic role as it represents the irrevocable loss of Rosa's daughter. In contrast, the material objects in *Mornings in Jenin* surpass abstract symbolism to account for a context characterized by ongoing systematic violence. This move from affective relic to tangible proof signifies the political agency and spirit of resistance embedded in Palestinian literature. By emphasizing the role of mnemonic objects in mediating between the aftermath of a collective tragedy and its present remembrance, Hirsch's postmemory centers on the reconstruction and imagination of lost experiences. Alternatively, Abulhawa's novel approaches memory from the perspective of the past continuous, as she mobilizes material objects to assert the present continuity of occupation and conflict. Under such conditions, oral memory and mnemonic objects do not merely recall the past for the purpose of affective investment; instead, they bridge the gap between the past and the present by contesting what persistently remains: dispossession, violence, and loss.

## Sites of Memory: Between Alienation and Erasure

Nora's influential claim that "we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left" was introduced as commentary against the modern obsession with commemoration that substitutes lived experience with sites of memory (7). The notion that memory can be inscribed in landscapes, sites, and geographies energized a modern boom of commemorative memory that was triggered by the anxiety of losing witness accounts. This was particularly true of the Holocaust, as the gradual passing of survivors, coupled with the ethical imperative of "never again," prompted concerns over the preservation of its memory. Within this context, commemorative practices sustain the formation of postmemory through archival and physical

materials. Conversely, due to various restrictions on the memorialization of its violence and trauma, Palestinian postmemory lacks institutional forms of recognition and commemoration. Bashir and Goldberg explore this erasure of Palestinian history as a consequence of what has been dubbed the "Nakba Law," a 2011 Israeli impediment against attempts to commemorate the events of 1948 within Israel-Palestine (2). The general lack of institutional commemoration of the Nakba and the abundance of Holocaust memorialization distinctly impact Jewish and Palestinian postmemory through respective fears of forgetting and threats of erasure.

The asymmetry here is worth stating in structural terms rather than descriptive ones. Nora's lieux de mémoire arise where milieux de mémoire have receded, which is to say that commemoration presupposes the cessation of the practices it replaces. Wolfe's account describes a situation in which the milieu is not receding but being actively dismantled, and in which the replacement of names, landscapes, and cadastral records constitutes an ongoing administrative operation rather than a completed historical fact (388). Nora's framework diagnoses forgetting as a byproduct of modernity. It has no category for forgetting as policy. When the Nakba Law criminalizes commemoration, the resulting absence of sites of memory cannot be read, in Nora's terms, as the natural attenuation of lived memory. It is the intended outcome of a legislative act. This distinction determines what the literary text is asked to do. Where commemoration is institutionally available, literature supplements the memorial. Where it is prohibited, literature substitutes for it.

In Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, the urban landscape of New York represents a temporal void where the past is alienated from the present. Artur Sammler, a Holocaust survivor, attempts to cope with the ethical decay of modern Western society while navigating his traumatic past and the prospects of an ideal future. The novel positions Sammler amidst his experiences in the concentration camp, his shallow existence in an amnesiac New York described as "quivering, riotous, lurid," and the utopian aspirations of abandoning Earth to inhabit the moon (147). To Sammler, Poland becomes a site of trauma engraved with memories of loss of home, loved ones, and humanity. He survives that experience by having to crawl out of a mass grave, which signifies his physical and spiritual rebirth but plagues him with intense feelings of survivor guilt. Sammler's rebirth grants him a renewed lifeline in an unsympathetic New York that ignores his history and amplifies his feelings of inadequacy, leading him to view the city as an embodiment of cultural and moral decay, reminiscent of "the collapse of civilization" (307). Sammler's perspective is heavily influenced by his experience as a Holocaust survivor; his memories of war, violence, and moral decay elicit constant concerns over the possibility of a second, renewed collapse. Echoing Rosa's distinction of before, during, and after, Sammler seeks to reunite with the memory that contextualizes his existence, as he wonders: "When had things seemed real, true? In Poland when blinded, in Zamosht when freezing, in the tomb when hungry" (251). Compared to these past experiences, Sammler's life in New York feels both hollow and artificial as it is unable to sustain his memory or acknowledge his history. The city that surrounds him is indifferent rather than hostile, and this distinction matters. New York does not erase Sammler's past; it simply has no use for it. The trauma he carries remains intact and unthreatened, held in a private archive that the urban landscape neither confirms nor contests.

In *The Book of Disappearance*, Ibtisam Azem similarly centers her narrative on the spatial rupture that marks the city of Jaffa. Set in a post-Nakba Palestine, the novel explores an alternative reality where Palestinians abruptly vanish from their homeland. The narrative navigates tensions between presence and absence through its portrayal of Tel Aviv/Jaffa as a layered space where geography is contested, repurposed, and politicized. The Palestinian landscape went through drastic geographical changes after its Nakba; from house demolitions

and destroyed cities and villages to "replaced street names," various attempts have been made to erase historical and geographical landmarks (95). To resist this erasure, Alaa channels his grandmother's memory to maintain the spatial integrity of a pre-1948 Jaffa. He habitually reminds himself "out loud of the names of streets, houses, and people," he records his grandmother's episodic memory shortly after her passing, and he actively attempts to "imagine" her Nakba (95, 228).

Azem's choice of city carries a weight that a reader unfamiliar with the settler colonial literature may miss, and it is worth making explicit. Jaffa functions in that scholarship as a paradigm case. Wolfe cites LeVine's judgment that the city "has had to be emptied of its Arab past and Arab inhabitants in order for architects to be able to reenvision the region as a 'typical Middle Eastern city'" (389), and he identifies renaming as "central to the cadastral effacement/replacement of the Palestinian Arab presence" (388). Masalha's chapter on toponymy supplies the historical substance behind the phrase. Place names in Palestine, he argues, became "a site of fierce contest between the European Zionist settler-coloniser and the colonised Palestinians," a contest in which Palestinian Arab names were "'unnamed' and Hebrewised" and in which indigenous names are held to be "redeemed" only once rendered from Arabic into Hebrew. Renaming, on this account, is not the incidental residue of conquest but one of its instruments, pursued through commissions and surveys with bureaucratic patience. Read against this, Alaa's recitation of street names ceases to be a private mnemonic habit and becomes a counter-cadastral practice. He is not recalling a lost city in the manner of Rosa recalling a lost daughter. He is maintaining a competing register against an official one, name by name, in a contest whose stakes are administrative as much as affective. The novel's speculative premise sharpens the point rather than softening it. By staging the total disappearance of Palestinians, Azem literalizes an operation already underway and invites the reader to notice how smoothly the remaining city absorbs the vacancy.

Despite residing in the same city, Alaa's Jaffa is distinctly different from his grandmother's, altered by systematic endeavors to destroy the Palestinian landscape and obscure its national identity and history. Alaa interacts with his grandmother's experience through a postmemorial approach built on imagination and projection, as he learns to "see" his city, its streets, and its people, as she "[was] seeing" them (16). The English translation of the novel employs the past continuous tense in this passage in a manner that echoes Allan's use of the same term to describe the ongoing urgency of the Nakba. The Palestinian characters in the novel are forced to endure active attempts at erasure in addition to the restrictions against the commemoration of their ongoing calamity. These conditions prompt memory to function as a central archive for the preservation of the past, enabling Alaa to look at his Jaffa and see his grandmother's Nakba. At the end of the novel, when all Palestinians have vanished, Alaa's records of his grandmother's memory are appropriated by his friend Ariel, who intends to publish the work as his own personal finding. This detail rewards attention, since it stages a problem that a comparative study of this kind must confront directly. Ariel's appropriation dramatizes the risk that Palestinian memory, once rendered into text, becomes available for narration by those positioned on the other side of the injury. Lentin's account of Israeli Nakba co-memory identifies the same difficulty from the opposite direction, asking what it means to commemorate a catastrophe one's own community produced. Azem's ending offers no reassurance on this question. The red notebook survives; its owner does not. Azem's authorial decision to construct her narrative around the disappearance of her Palestinian characters is a powerful commentary against the normalization of the absence of Palestinians within the urban landscape. In such an environment, homes, streets, and cities become sites of memory that archive presence through absence, allowing for overwritten traces of life, history, and identity to materialize through spatial memory.

Bellow and Azem respectively center their works on the manifestation of collective memory in sites and locations. Their representation of distinct spatial and temporal conditions triggers different concerns over the mnemonic integrity of the Holocaust and the Nakba. While Bellow emphasizes the state of alienation that marks a shallow urban landscape that fails to adequately acknowledge the momentous impact of the traumatic past, Azem explores memory's utility in reclaiming occupied spaces and resituating Palestinian identity and presence within the urban landscape. The two works equally channel Hirsch's framework in their depiction of intergenerational memory transmission as a central approach to preserving the past. However, unlike the mnemonic disjunction experienced in a progressive yet corrupt New York, Azem's characters tackle the systematic erasure of their identity, history, and way of life. In this context, memory is engraved in sites and bodies, not as a coping mechanism but as a means of survival. Memory actively counters measures to suppress the Palestinian past and eliminate its material and spatial traces in the present. Hirsch's postmemory functions to preserve, recover, and repair the past in an attempt to sustain its memory against the passage of time. This assumption of temporal distance is challenged by Azem's representation of ongoing dispossession and systematic suppression. Under these conditions, memory becomes a site of contestation and resistance, where the past is not merely recalled but rather reaffirmed.

## The Body as Archive: Inherited Trauma and Recursive Violence

The mediation of memory does not stop at objects and sites, but extends to the affective and sensory traces imprinted within the body. Freud, LaCapra, and Caruth all focused, in some capacity or other, on collective, individual, and psychological responses against trauma, as they explored the role of memory in concealing, expressing, or re-experiencing traumatic episodes and histories (Freud 319; Caruth 15; LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss" 716). Similarly, Thomas Fuchs examines the temporal orientation of internalized experience by writing that "Body memory does not take one back to the past, but conveys an implicit effectiveness of the past in the present" (73). Based on its presumptions of temporal closure, Hirsch's postmemory outlines a clear divide between memory and postmemory, generation and postgeneration, and past and present. The body is a secondary archive, alongside photographs, objects, and sites, that sustains the inherited memory of past mediated trauma. Hirsch uses the terms "re-embody" and "re-individualize" to reference the mediation process of mnemonic identification with familial and cultural trauma (36). This stands in stark opposition to the Palestinian context where past trauma blends with present violence to form an ongoing lived reality. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod refer to the Nakba as "the point of reference for other events, past and future" (5). Adrien Zakar echoes this reflection through his attempt to trace the origins of the Nakba as an ideation of catastrophe in Palestinian historiography, as he clarifies its status as both "an instantial event of catastrophe and an ongoing process experienced in the everyday" (117). This described temporal continuity, marked by recursive violence, challenges postmemory's assumption of aftermath and recenters corporeal memory as a site of resistance, rather than inheritance.

Marked by residual trauma and belatedness, the representation of the Holocaust in the two novels centers on issues of narration and transmission. In this context, the body becomes a vessel of untreated trauma that persists despite the aftermath of catastrophe. In *The Shawl* this embodied dimension is portrayed through Rosa's nostalgic attachment to a traumatic past that houses the memory of her daughter. Unable to move on from her tragedy, Rosa's own body emerges as a site of memory that hosts the affective and sensory traces that connect her back to the past. She contemplates life in Florida and decides that "Everyone had left behind a real life"

(16). Later in the narrative, she admits to Persky that "a person lives where they can. If all they got is thoughts, that's where they live" (27–28). Rosa's inability to fully live in the present intimately relates to her somatic attachment to the shawl, an object that triggers physical and mnemonic responses upon contact with her body. To highlight this attachment, Rosa proclaims that, by mere proximity to the shawl, it felt as if "someone had cut out her life-organs and given them to her to hold" (56). By sustaining this mnemonic link to the shawl, Rosa internalizes her grief and reenacts its memory through affective, sensory, and embodied traces. Comparably, Sammler carries physical evidence of his experience as a Holocaust victim through a sustained injury that leaves him blind in one eye, which serves as a literal symbol of his distinct perspective. Sammler's injured eye affects how he views the modern landscape of New York; he admits that "my judgments are different. Altered. Like my eyesight" (214). Physical and mnemonic states reflect one another as Sammler's injured eye becomes a visible manifestation of the irreversible damage of war and its residual trauma. To his family, Sammler bears the responsibility of transmitting and representing the painful history of the Holocaust. In fulfilling this "symbolic task," Sammler's body becomes witness to a past that cannot fully be communicated (95). This physical and mnemonic baggage puts him at odds with an urban space that neither acknowledges nor accommodates his individual history and trauma. In both texts, the residual effects of trauma are portrayed through mnemonic and embodied traces. The body operates as another archive in the process of transmitting inherited memory. By portraying past violence and present alienation as distinct temporal chapters, the two novels' representation of Holocaust memory closely aligns with Hirsch's framework of aftermath, belatedness, and residual trauma. The crucial formal feature is that in each case the wound is complete. Sammler's eye will not be injured again; Rosa's daughter will not be taken twice.

In their depiction of Palestinian postmemory, literary narratives restructure the notion of embodied memory as an ongoing site of inscription rather than an archive marked by temporal and historical distance. Both *Mornings in Jenin* and *The Book of Disappearance* describe a state of recursive violence where the Nakba continues its reign as a mnemonic event and a lived reality. Abulhawa and Azem both explore the continuity of memory, not only as a process of inheritance but as a lived experience for the offspring of Nakba survivors who stayed in Palestine. For the Palestinian postgeneration, the embodied dimension is unsettled by the absence of temporal distance or aftermath, which positions the body within trauma, as opposed to after its conclusion. In *Mornings in Jenin* this is evident in the physical and mental scars caused by the violent dispossession and displacement of the Palestinian characters. In one of the more significant moments in the narrative, Abulhawa depicts the instant recognition of a once-stolen Palestinian infant by the scar on his head. Having been taken by a Jewish soldier at the cusp of Palestine's Nakba, Ismael/David is stripped of his identity and conditioned to inhabit the life of an imposter. Later in the novel, he reunites with his estranged brother as soldier and prisoner, and the pair instantly recognize one another. Abulhawa frames the scene as one of somatic connection, as she writes: "A Jewish soldier, whose face is mine, has taken my brother's scar" (103). The abduction of the child is not incidental to the novel's argument about memory. Shalhoub-Kevorkian's concept of unchilding names the political work of violence that evicts colonized children from the category of childhood itself, constructing them as racialized others and thereby rendering them available for a range of interventions that would be unthinkable elsewhere. Ismael's removal, his renaming, and his reconstruction as David enact this eviction with unusual literalness. What the scar preserves is the trace of an identity that administrative and familial reassignment could not fully overwrite. Throughout the narrative, the author reinforces notions of national identity and belonging through external states and physical manifestations. Characters note the "common lineage" reflected in their "features," a telltale biological indication of shared history and culture (7). In other passages,

Yehya, the family's patriarch, reflects on how Arabs "name their children to tell the story of their genealogy," while later revealing that his daughter was named Amal "with a long vowel because the short vowel means just one hope, one wish" (34–35, 72). This reflects a real Palestinian tradition that bestows the names of landscapes, such as Bisan, Jenin, and Yafa, on offspring; an endeavor against the eradication of the Palestinian homeland through the consolidation of memory within individuals themselves (Seyam). Set beside Wolfe's account of renaming as cadastral effacement, the practice reads as a direct counter-operation. Where the toponymy of the land is overwritten, the toponymy is relocated into the bodies of children.

A similar dynamic structures Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* through its centrality of absent presence. The novel showcases the instrumental use of memory in preserving identity, locations, and history through the figure of the family's matriarch, who safeguards the past. Alaa's decision to archive his grandmother's memories occurs shortly after her death and is inspired by fear "against forgetfulness" (97). With the death of the matriarch, the imminent threat of gradual memory loss looms over Alaa and his family. It inspires concrete fears over the disappearance of valuable lived memory concerning the Nakba and its pre-existing pastoral Palestine. Alaa stores his grandmother's memory in the pages of his red notebook as he navigates the tapestry of her life. Primarily, however, the novel's protagonist retains these episodes in his own memory, employing his faculty of recollection to conjure up her stories and accounts, as he proclaims: "We inherit memory the way we inherit the color of our eyes and skin" (88). The formulation is worth pausing over, since it makes a claim that Hirsch's framework cannot quite accommodate. To inherit memory as one inherits pigmentation is to receive it as constitutive rather than transmitted, as a feature of the organism rather than a deposit placed in it. Hirsch's postgeneration receives memory through mediation and must labor imaginatively to inhabit it. Alaa's formulation collapses that labor into inheritance itself. Jabr's clinical framework supplies a grounding for this literary claim. She describes Palestinian psychological experience as one in which trauma and identity are not separable—the body does not store memory; it is memory. Her patients, she writes, are their history insofar as that history has not ceased to unfold (Jabr 88–89). Alaa's assertion that memory is inherited "the way we inherit the color of our eyes and skin" reads, in this clinical light, not as metaphor but as diagnosis. The body, for Jabr as for Azem, is not a receptacle for the past. It is the medium of a continuous present. The red notebook serves as a neutral space that allows him to work through these intergenerational memories and establish a channel of communication with his late grandmother, but it is within his own body that these recollections find home.

The two sets of narratives explore corporeal memory similarly, examining the way the individual body can store trauma through affective, sensory, verbal, and non-verbal cues and gestures. The central point of divergence emerges from the contextual and temporal orientation of trauma as either concluded or ongoing. Marked by belatedness and distance, *The Shawl* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* engage Jewish postmemory as an inherited archive where the body preserves residual trauma. Conversely, through their depiction of recursive and ongoing violence, *Mornings in Jenin* and *The Book of Disappearance* represent the body as more than an archive, but rather as a site of mnemonic resistance. Eagle and Kaminer's account of continuous traumatic stress helps specify what is at stake in this difference. Where the stressor is located in the present and the future rather than the past, and where protective systems are absent, the body is not primarily engaged in the work of retrospective processing (85). It is engaged in anticipation. The vigilance this produces is not a symptom of a past injury but a rational response to a present condition, and it belongs to a temporal order that postmemory, oriented as it is toward what has already occurred, was not designed to describe. Jabr's distinction between trauma as a punctual event and suffering as an ongoing condition sharpens

this point: where Hirsch's framework is built around injury that can be worked through, the Palestinian texts examined here depict a suffering that persists, generating resilience and political meaning from within the condition itself (Jabr 42–44, 89). In considering the temporal context of the Holocaust and the Nakba, any attempt to universalize the function of individual bodies in storing trauma or transmitting memory crumbles under distinct historical and cultural conditions. The temporal status of violence, as either past or ongoing, intrinsically influences the stakes of corporeal memory. Under conditions of continuous violence, past catastrophe and present lived experience merge as waves of trauma overlap and intersect. Postmemory's underlying presumption of the distinction between the past and the present is limited in accounting for the simultaneous occurrence of historical and lived memory. As current generations of Palestinians endure the recursive violence experienced by their parents and grandparents, corporeal memory functions less as a repository of past trauma and more as a channel of active resistance against physical and cultural erasure. Salam's account of Amal converges here: her wound is bound to a trauma "not governed by a mere past, but rather by a past-in-the-present" (109). The body in these novels does not archive a completed injury. It registers one still being administered.

## Conclusion

Through its exploration of the mnemonic representation of the Holocaust and the Nakba in select Jewish and Palestinian narratives, this article has argued that postmemory's framework, while foundational, is based on distinct temporal assumptions that insufficiently account for contexts of ongoing violence. The unique contextual and mnemonic conditions of the Nakba require the examination of past trauma alongside recursive and continuous violence that disrupts clear boundaries between the past and the present. In an endeavor to conceptualize the Nakba as a legal notion, Rabea Eghbariah explores its unique and intersecting dimensions of structure and rupture. The Nakba's structural presence arises as a result of its ongoing nature, which frames the lived experience of Palestinians, while signs of rupture manifest in the physical and mnemonic fragmentation of Palestinian reality (901). Consequently, this conditions Palestinian memory to be characterized by oral history, gaps, multitemporality, and resistance. These elements challenge postmemory's temporal assumptions of distance through present stakes that distinguish the Nakba as a constantly evolving phenomenon shaped by multiple overlapping temporalities framed by lived proximity and continuous damage. Through a literary analysis of the dynamic roles of mnemonic objects, spaces, and bodies, this article highlights a key shift from the representation of past trauma to the exploration of lived reality. At the level of materiality, examination of mnemonic objects in *The Shawl* and *Mornings in Jenin* reveals a move from relic to evidence, as objects perform differing functions from preserving the traumatic past through materiality to asserting historical and legal claims to seized ancestral homes and lands. This shift is further developed through a comparative study of the urban landscape as a site of forgetfulness and neglect of the past in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, as opposed to a contested space under active threat of suppression and erasure as portrayed in *The Book of Disappearance*. Finally, at the level of corporeal memory, this article utilized key moments from all four novels to underline the transition from embodied and archival memory in Holocaust literature to ongoing mnemonic inscription and recursive trauma in the representation of the Nakba.

The divergence in the utility of memory between the two sets of novels signifies a shift in orientation from representation and preservation to lived reality and resistance. The framework of postmemory, with its origin in Holocaust studies, is developed from assumptions of historical aftermath, temporal distance, and anxiety over archival loss. Faced with conditions of ongoing

and recursive violence, these assumptions fail to account for the breakdown of distinct parameters between past and present, as well as memory and postmemory. This theoretical inadequacy reveals postmemory's temporal and structural limitations, and calls for a recalibration of this framework to include experiences of generational trauma transmission characterized by continuity and political and cultural resistance. Through a consideration of memory's simultaneous potential in functioning as both embodied and lived reality, postmemory's separation between event and experience can be seen as a multidirectional and ongoing, rather than fixed, process (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 3). While this article does not suggest that Hirsch's postmemory should be dismissed based on these limitations, it emphasizes the need for inclusivity within its theoretical structure. Under this intervention, we can begin to acknowledge how postmemory operates across distinct but related temporal, cultural, and political conditions. Such a distinction is not based on opposition, as it underlines the influence of geopolitical contexts in the representation, recollection, and transmission of collective memory.

What such a recalibration would require can be stated with some precision. Postmemory rests on three linked assumptions: that the traumatic event has concluded, that the postgeneration stands at a remove from it, and that the work of memory is fundamentally reparative. Each of these can be loosened without abandoning the framework. An account of postmemory adequate to conditions of continuity would treat temporal distance as a variable rather than a precondition, would recognize that the postgeneration may be simultaneously an inheriting and an experiencing generation, and would admit instrumental and evidentiary functions of memory alongside reparative ones. None of these adjustments requires discarding Hirsch's central insight regarding the imaginative labor by which the descendants of catastrophe come to inhabit a past that is not theirs. They require only that the insight be released from the historical circumstances of its formulation.

Two limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The first concerns the evidentiary base. Four novels cannot sustain claims about national literary traditions, and the selection made here privileged texts that foreground familial transmission, material culture, and embodiment, which is to say texts already hospitable to the categories being tested. A corpus assembled on different principles, one that included Palestinian writing indifferent to the Nakba or Jewish writing that resists the postmemorial frame, would likely yield a more complicated picture. The second concerns the asymmetry of the comparison itself. The Holocaust texts examined here are American, written in English, and situated within a literary and institutional culture in which Holocaust memory enjoys extensive support. The Palestinian texts, one of them in translation, emerge under conditions that include legal restriction on commemoration. The divergence this article traces is therefore not a divergence between two literatures conceived as equivalent objects, and readers should resist any inference that the comparison establishes symmetry between the histories themselves. What it establishes is narrower and, this article contends, more useful: that a framework built to describe one mnemonic situation distorts another, and that attending to the distortion tells us something about the framework.

The wager underlying this study is that connective reading of this kind is worth its risks. Bringing the Holocaust and the Nakba into the same analytical frame carries the danger of flattening the specificity of either, and that danger is real rather than rhetorical. But the alternative, a scholarship in which each catastrophe is theorized in isolation and the frameworks generated by one are silently exported to the other, carries a cost of its own. Postmemory traveled from Holocaust studies to Palestinian literary criticism without an accounting of what it assumed. The purpose of the foregoing has been to render that accounting, not in order to police the movement of concepts across contexts, but to make the movement deliberate.

## Works Cited

Abulhawa, Susan. *Mornings in Jenin*. UK ed., Bloomsbury Paperbacks, 2011.

AlAmmar, Layla. "Palestinian Postmemory: Melancholia and the Absent Subject in Larissa Sansour's In Vitro, Saleem Haddad's 'Song of the Birds,' and Adania Shibli's Touch." *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–23.

Al-Hardan, Anaheed. *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities*. Columbia University Press, 2016.

Allan, Diana. "Introduction: Past Continuous." *Voices of the Nakba: A Living History of Palestine*, edited by Diana Allan, translated by Hoda Adra et al., Pluto Press, 2021, pp. 1–19.

Assmann, Jan. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Azem, Ibtisam. *The Book of Disappearance: A Novel*. Translated by Sinan Antoon, Syracuse University Press, 2019.

Bashir, Bashir, and Amos Goldberg, editors. *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

Bellow, Saul. *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Viking Press, 1970.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Craps, Stef. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Eagle, Gillian, and Debra Kaminer. "Continuous Traumatic Stress: Expanding the Lexicon of Traumatic Stress." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2013, pp. 85–99. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032485.

Eghbariah, Rabea. "Toward Nakba as a Legal Concept." *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 124, no. 4, 2024, pp. 887–992.

Freud, Sigmund. "Screen Memories." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. III, translated by James Strachey, Hogarth Press, 1962, pp. 299–322.

Fuchs, Thomas. "Body Memory and the Unconscious." *Founding Psychoanalysis Phenomenologically: Phenomenological Theory of Subjectivity and the Psychoanalytic Experience*, edited by Dieter Lohmar and Jagna Brudzińska, Springer, 2011, pp. 69–82.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *The Collective Memory*. Translated by Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter, 1st ed., Harper & Row, 1980.

Herremans, Brigitte. "Resisting Erasure: Palestinian Literature and Informal Archives." *Memory Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2026, pp. 97–114. https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980251397895.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press, 2012.

Ilmonen, Kaisa. "Intersectionality." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, Routledge, 2020, pp. 173–84.

Jabr, Samah. *Radiance in Pain and Resilience: The Global Reverberation of Palestinian Historical Trauma*. Wakefield Press, 2025.

Khoury, Elias. "Rethinking the Nakba." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2012, pp. 250–66. https://doi.org/10.1086/662741.

Khoury, Nadim. "Postnational Memory: Narrating the Holocaust and the Nakba." *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2020, pp. 91–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719839448.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. Cornell University Press, 1994.
---. "Trauma, Absence, Loss." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1999, pp. 696–727.
Lentin, Ronit. *Co-memory and Melancholia: Israelis Memorialising the Palestinian Nakba*. Manchester University Press, 2010.
Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge, 2008.
Masalha, Nur. *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*. Zed Books, 2012.
Musleh-Motut, Nawal. *Connecting the Holocaust and the Nakba Through Photograph-based Storytelling: Willing the Impossible*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26, 1989, pp. 7–24.
Ozick, Cynthia. *The Shawl*. Vintage Books, 1990.
Rothberg, Michael. "From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory." *Criticism*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2011, pp. 523–48.
---. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford University Press, 2009.
---. "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 40, nos. 1–2, 2008, pp. 224–34.
Sa'di, Aḥmad, and Lila Abu-Lughod. *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*. Columbia University Press, 2007.
Salam, Wael. "The Burden of the Past: Memories, Resistance and Existence in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* and Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*." *Interventions*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2022, pp. 31–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1863840.
---. "The Palestinian Re-experience of Historical Violence: 'A Wound Never Completely Scabbed Over'." *English Studies*, vol. 103, no. 1, 2022, pp. 94–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2021.1997469.
Sela, Avraham, and Alon Kadish. "Israeli and Palestinian Memories and Historical Narratives of the 1948 War—An Overview." *Israel Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–26.
Seyam, Nesma. "Palestinian Names Aim to Keep Occupied Cities in Memory." *Anadolu Agency*, 19 Feb. 2020, www.aa.com.tr/en/life/palestinian-names-aim-to-keep-occupied-cities-in-memory/1738077.
Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Nadera. *Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
Visser, Irene. "Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies." *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, edited by Michelle Balaev, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 106–29.
Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2006, pp. 387–409. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240.
Young, James E. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. Yale University Press, 1993.
Zakar, Adrien. "Nakba: Catastrophic Ideation and the Meanings of Disaster (1895–1948)." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 131, no. 1, Mar. 2026, pp. 114–42.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Beyond Women-as-Nation: Speculative Recoveries of the Women of Marrakesh in Saeida Rouass's *Assembly of the Dead*

**Chadi El Mtouni**
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.9422

**Chadi El Mtouni** is a PhD candidate at the Afro-Mediterranean Research Laboratory of Discourse, Communication, and Cultural Studies. Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fes, Morocco. His research focuses on the intersections of memory, trauma, gendered political violence, and postcolonial studies in the Maghreb.

chadielmtouni@outlook.com https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4072-216X

Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 04-02-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Beyond Women-as-Nation: Speculative Recoveries of the Women of Marrakesh in Saeida Rouass's *Assembly of the Dead*

**Chadi El Mtouni**
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University

## ABSTRACT

Set against the 1906 Algeciras Conference, *Assembly of the Dead* exhumes the historical case of "Moorish Jack the Ripper" in Marrakesh to interrogate what Brahim El Guabli terms "gender-unaware history," a Moroccan historiography that systematically erases female experience from the national record. Analyzing Saeida Rouass's postcolonial historical novel *Assembly of the Dead* (2017), this study employs Saidiya Hartman's method of "critical fabulation" to examine the speculative narrative recovery of thirty-six real serial murder victims. The article argues that Rouass's diasporic memory-work disrupts the simplistic reduction of women to territorial allegories of a "penetrated" nation. By highlighting the victims' individual agency, names, and private desires, the narrative stages a friction against both local patriarchal negligence and colonialist homogenization. Ultimately, this study positions the postcolonial historical novel as a restorative historiographical corrective. It demonstrates how a diasporic vantage point enables a transnational practice of memory to restore dignity to those whom the official record deemed expendable.

## KEYWORDS

**Moroccan Historiography**

**Diasporic Literature**

**Postcolonial Historical Novel**

**Critical Fabulation**

**Saeida Rouass**

## Introduction

Marrakesh in 1906 exists as a precarious threshold, caught between the twilight of Moroccan sovereignty and the peak of European colonial expansion. Saeida Rouass's *Assembly of the Dead* (2017) does not only inhabit this temporal friction; it weaponizes the historical novel genre to interrogate the silences buried beneath the Algeciras Conference's diplomatic ink. As the sultanate trembles under the weight of mounting debt and colonial voyeurism, Farook al-Alami, a detective summoned from Tangier, navigates a city where the disappearance of women mirrors the impending dissolution of the state. It is a landscape of profound instability. Here, the archive is broken. Rouass inhabits the gaps of history and gives voice to those whom the official record has deemed expendable.

Traditional nationalist discourses have long conscripted the female body as a convenient shorthand for territorial integrity, casting the woman as a passive motherland to be defended or a virgin to be despoiled. Rouass disrupts this tired iconography. Read through the lens of what Brahim El Guabli terms "gender-unaware history," the novel reveals that the gendered violence stalking the alleyways of Marrakesh is not singular and static, but rather a diagnostic register

Contact ✉ chadielmtouni@outlook.com
©2026

of a nation being partitioned in the shadows. The missing women are those forgotten by history; they are the charnel intersection where patriarchal negligence and imperial ambition collide.

Saeida Rouass's background as a Moroccan-British author born and raised in East London frames *Assembly of the Dead* as a diasporic intervention. Her return, in a literary sense, to the home of her parents enables a critical retrospective re-imagining of this historical era. This diasporic positioning affords Rouass a generative liminality, a productive friction between cultural intimacy and critical distance. Rather than asserting an inherent evaluative superiority over local or foreign accounts, this paper argues that her dual vantage point allows a specific diagnostic capability: it enables her to navigate outside the domestic, patriarchal historiographical pressures that have historically conditioned national memory within Morocco, while remaining free from the exoticizing or reductive gaze often characteristic of purely external, Eurocentric perspectives. This transnational lens allows Rouass to offer a nuanced, yet incisive, critique of historical silences and to foreground aspects often overlooked by official narratives that tend to be male-authored and focused on political figures.

Rouass exhumes the real historical case of Hadj Mohammed Mesfewi, a serial killer infamously christened the "Moorish Jack the Ripper," to anchor her fictional exploration of this critical colonial moment. By linking the horrific serial killings to the broader fate of the nation, Rouass establishes an analogy between the wounded city and wounded womanhood, and suggests that the violation of female bodies mirrors the public subjugation of national sovereignty.

*Assembly of the Dead*—the title is Rouass's English adaptation of the Arabic *Jamaa el-Fnaa*—is set amidst the fragile reign of Sultan Abd al-Aziz. The protagonist, Farook al-Alami, is sent by order of the Sultan to investigate the disappearances, reports of which had been largely ignored by local officials. Farook employs modern police techniques and uses intuition to advance the stalled case. He discovers that the reported disappearances were part of a much larger crime spree. Farook eventually identifies thirty-six victims in total (Rouass 251). Farook's investigation is complicated by political intrigue, particularly the interference of the Pasha Hajj Abdeslam al-Wazy and the Sultan's brother, Caliph Moulay Hafid, who use the fear surrounding the missing women for political gain. This tension is exacerbated by the arrival of the Glaoui, tribesmen notorious for being "armed to the teeth and thirsty for blood" (Rouass 203). They are in Marrakesh at the invitation of Caliph Moulay Hafid, who covets the throne held by his brother, Sultan Abd al-Aziz. Their presence is intended to occupy the city and show the Caliph's might to his brother, rather than to protect it.

The novel's authenticity is enhanced by Rouass's extensive research, including a six-month residency in Marrakesh, which allowed her to capture the intricate historical atmosphere (Rouass, "Diaspo"). Saeida Rouass concludes her novel with a "Historical Note" (275-77) in which she details the historical inquiry and research she conducted during the writing process to ground the fiction in actual events. She states that Mesfewi had murdered the women, buried twenty-six bodies under his shop and ten in his garden. In the plot, Farook uncovers the killer's identity as Hajj Mohammed Mesfewi, a cobbler and letter writer. Mesfewi was publicly punished by being immured in *Jamaa el-Fnaa* in June 1906, a punishment chosen after European diplomats halted plans for crucifixion (Rouass 275-77).

To marshal these diverse critical perspectives, this article establishes a theoretical hierarchy that couples Brahim El Guabli's diagnostic concept of "gender-unaware history" with Saidiya Hartman's restorative methodology of "critical fabulation." Within this architecture, El Guabli's framework serves as the primary diagnostic lens to expose how national historiographies erase ordinary Moroccan women from the historical record. In turn, Hartman's critical fabulation functions as the primary methodological tool, which provides the speculative means necessary to restore these women to the narrative in the subjunctive mode. To keep these speculative leaps

from detaching entirely from historical realities, three auxiliary concepts remain subordinate to this primary dyad to serve as interpretive supports throughout the analysis. First, Mary E. John's "politics of location" maps the specific geographical and social marginality where this gendered erasure occurs. Second, Claire Chambers's "sensory epistemology" is incorporated to flesh out the somatic, tactile details that drive Hartman's "critical fabulation." Finally, Hamish Dalley's "allegorical realism" functions as an analytical anchor that ensures this speculative recovery remains ethically and materially tethered to the lived conditions of the historical actors.

While scholarship has largely overlooked how diasporic narratives interrogate local, gender-unaware archival erasures, this article addresses this gap by demonstrating how Rouass's novel aims to restore the specific, embodied agency of ordinary Moroccan women, thereby positioning the postcolonial historical novel as a restorative historiographical corrective rather than a mere literary representation. This article posits that *Assembly of the Dead* transcends a simplistic allegorization of women-as-territory. Instead, it mobilizes and, crucially, complicates the women-as-a-metaphor-for-the-nation trope. Rouass's narrative strategy of naming and granting agency to the female victims counters their historical erasure and marginalization in official accounts. The novel's intervention in national memory thus highlights the enduring impact of colonial and patriarchal structures on Moroccan society, as it strives to recuperate forgotten histories. The subsequent sections of this article will delve into the theoretical underpinnings of the postcolonial historical novel, the historical context of gendered erasure in Moroccan historiography, the nuanced portrayal of the female victims, and the hybrid detective Farook al-Alami's function as an interpretive vehicle through which these gendered erasures are exposed. The conclusion will synthesize these arguments to discuss the broader implications of Rouass's diasporic narrative on Moroccan historiography.

## The Postcolonial Historical Novel and the Epistemology of Knowing the Past

*Assembly of the Dead* operates squarely within the genre of the postcolonial historical novel, a literary form inherently fraught with political implications in societies shaped by colonial occupation and conflict (Dalley 4). Rouass's narrative revisits a contested past in Morocco, specifically the period leading up to the Algeciras Conference in January 1906, where the nation's future was being debated and its sovereignty gravely threatened. In the novel, this historical moment is not presented as a stable, agreed-upon narrative but rather as a site of ongoing dispute. Indeed, this generic framing serves as a justification for why Rouass sidelined the high diplomacy of the Algeciras Conference to center the narrative on the awakening of the forgotten women, to echo Lukács's premise that "what really matters in the historical novel is not the mere 're-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events'" (Chakrabarti 27). Thus, the novel's engagement with the Moorish Jack the Ripper case underscores its negotiation with a past that is simultaneously recorded and open to fictional interpretation.

Hamish Dalley argues that postcolonial historical novels, despite their fictionality, assert a profound "epistemological claim that fictional narratives about history ought to be treated as serious interpretations of the past" (9). Rouass's work exemplifies this realist imperative through a material specificity that meticulously details historical contexts and character motivations, even when inventing specific events. Within this framework, the novel's realist imperative redefines the pursuit of historical truth as a quest for an "unauthorized" history that the state record cannot contain; the objective here is "not to dismiss the possibility of historical truth... but to make space for unauthorized histories—histories of the silenced, the oppressed, the ignored—to emerge" (Guest 212). The deployment of allegorical realism, a literary mode

where history is staged as a scene of "irresistible decay" and characters function as both singular individuals and types, allows the novel to produce interpretations of the past where fictional elements "oscillate dynamically between abstract and singular referents" (Dalley 16). In this textual space, "allegory... embodies the stubborn persistence of fragments and remnants of the past in the present – and the vulnerability of that concretized continuity to defacement, distortion, and dilapidation" (Chay 3). Through this mode, the novel transcends direct historical recounting to function as a critique of the epistemic violence inherent in dominant historical narratives that often erase individual lives in favor of abstract categories.

In *Assembly of the Dead*, the negotiation of these representational limits is mediated by the conceptual tension between the "indicative" and "subjunctive" modes of history. This tension between the indicative and the subjunctive is intrinsically bound to the negotiation between historical determinism and human agency. While traditional historiography operates in an indicative mode, remaining—theoretically—committed to being "truthful to reality down to the smallest detail" (Meretoja 66), the postcolonial historical novel tends to pivot toward the subjunctive. According to Hanna Meretoja, engaging with the past requires a "sense of the possible," an imaginative faculty that allows one to approach history not merely as a repository of finished facts, but as a "space of possibility" (69). In this subjunctive mode, fictional narratives interrogate the "actual in relation to the possible," to explore "what did not happen but could have happened" (75). Through an "explorative" (75) and non-subsumptive mode of storytelling, the subjunctive mode highlights the open-ended potentiality of specific historical moments, showing how things might have been otherwise.

Furthermore, the subjunctive mode allows the novel to restore the inherent fluidity of the past before it was ossified into official record. Drawing on the work of William Galperin, Yoon Sun Lee suggests that the historical novel is uniquely equipped to evoke the "possibilities that remain open in the past" (Lee 183). By focusing on the "unreliability of the sensation of movement" (182), Lee argues that the historical novel can use sensory disorientation as an "analogue of historical transition itself," representing such moments "viscerally" (180). Rather than viewing historical transitions as inevitable or as a fixed "sequence of events whose outcome is already known," the novel presents history as a series of "orientations and disorientations" (193).

This engagement with unrealized options is furthered by Paul Fairfield in his book *Historical Imagination: Hermeneutics and Cultural Narrative*, where he argues that authors occupy an "intermediate zone between discovery and invention" (Fairfield xiii). By embracing the "fictionality inherent in the concept of history" (Lee 182), the historical novel allows the author to act as a "midwife" to a story that "needs to be told," ensuring that the narrative is found within the phenomena rather than being a result of "hermeneutic violence" (Fairfield 142) where a fixed order is simply projected:

> Whether we are speaking of history or fiction, the storytelling art is intermediate between imposition and discovery; the order or structure that every narrative contains is neither wholly invented and projected onto experiences that hitherto were without it nor strictly found within them. Instead, we must speak of narrative as a reinterpretation of what has already been understood or preunderstood, a creative redescription that can modify and enrich an understanding that had been not absent but inchoate. (Fairfield xv)

By framing 1906 Marrakesh as a volatile arena of competing futures, Rouass's narrative activates this subjunctive space. The novel thus manifests that while indicative history provides the necessary grounding of what occurred, a subjunctive engagement through the literary imagination is required to fully humanize the past and explore the ethical and agential possibilities of what could have been. This perspective is critical for subjects whose alternative paths were shut down by state power, as it treats the "living past" (Fairfield xx) not as a "blank canvas" but as an "interpretive field inexhaustible in meaning" (Fairfield 144). Ultimately, this subjunctive approach creates a retrospection of anticipation—a "looking-back to a looking-forward" (Lee 193)—that keeps the "potentiality" of the past alive for the present (Fairfield 142).

Diana Wallace argues that the historical novel has historically been defined by a framework that privileges "world-historical events and male protagonists" while dismissing women's historical fiction as trivial or "tosh" (Wallace 206). Rouass's shifting of the narrative lens from the diplomatic halls to the alleyways of Marrakesh can be perceived as a challenge to what Wallace identifies as the masculinist tradition of the historical novel. In viewing history primarily through the lens of wars and treaties, the traditional canon renders the female experience invisible. *Assembly of the Dead* subverts this hierarchy by positioning the Algeciras Conference as a backdrop to the urgent, visceral reality of the "discontinuities in women's history" (Wallace 216). Instead, Rouass uses the historical novel genre to expose the gaps where the history of the nation fails to account for the gendered violence that underpins it.

The novel's blend of historical events and fictional elements asserts its epistemological claims about the past. The depiction of the serial killings, for instance, is a parallel for the systemic violence and marginalization of women in early twentieth-century Morocco. This historical setting illustrates the framework of paracoloniality, which "transcends the 'tired triad' of the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial... it is 'a time that preceded, sat alongside, and exceeded the colonial'" (Pernau 278). The fictional narrative thread of Farook's investigation functions as a means of knowing the past through reconstructing events and uncovering truths that historical accounts might have suppressed. The novel's intertextuality extends beyond explicit historical documents to challenge the historiographical silence on women's experiences. As Dalley notes, historical novels "invite comparison with what is already known about the historical world from other sources" and are "open to scrutiny, supplementation, and correction" (13).

Regarding characterization, Hamish Dalley suggests that the postcolonial historical novel substitutes "an alternative sociological imaginary into typifying procedures, producing imaginary exemplars of the independent nation" (28). These characters, while fictional, are crafted to typify broader historical phenomena or social trends. However, while typification can often manifest as a form of epistemic violence by negating individual lives, Rouass complicates this process. She presents characters like Assiya, Souad, Maryam, and Leila as imaginary exemplars but resists their reduction to mere types by imbuing them with names, agency, and unique circumstances. This creates a dialectic between typification and singularity, where individual stories disrupt the abstract and homogenizing narratives of history. This subversion of typification, achieved through rich characterization, allows the novel to highlight the human cost of historical processes and the violence of erasure.

Moreover, the novel's structure as a detective story, where Farook uncovers clues, mirrors the epistemological process of historical research. Here, history is stripped of its supposed neutrality. It is revealed not as a collection of established facts to be inherited, but as a fractured archive that only yields its secrets to those willing to perform the work of reconstruction. Farook's methods, such as his insistence on the pursuit of "hard evidence" (Rouass 199), are

akin to a historian's critical engagement with sources. The novel thus not only presents a historical narrative but also dramatizes the very process of historical knowledge production, showing that history is not a fixed entity but a dynamic reconstruction, especially when dealing with contested pasts and marginalized voices.

The premise of recuperating erased lives constitutes a literary enactment of Saidiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation." The Moorish Jack the Ripper case presents an archival challenge because the official records list the victims merely as a collective statistic of thirty-six women. Rouass confronts the violence of the archive itself through her narrative choices. By shifting the structural lens to the traumatic disappearances, the narrative highlights how such novels are "preoccupied with the idea of the recovery of memory of women's adverse experiences" (Gámez Fuentes and Maseda García 81). Hartman argues that the narration of lives reduced to footnotes requires a writing practice that strains "against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive" (Hartman 11).

However, applying Hartman's framework to late-nineteenth-century Morocco requires navigating the geopolitical and ethical limits of the analogy. Critical fabulation emerges from the devastating history of transatlantic slavery, a space of absolute commodification where the archived subject is reduced to "cargo, inert masses, and things" (Hartman 10). As Olive J. Casey notes, Hartman's method "severs the historian's loyalty to the archives" to confront the systemic, anti-Black structures embedded in their very creation (Casey 121). While both contexts confront an archive that reduces marginalized subjects to brief, violent encounters with power, the absolute ontological void of the transatlantic slave ship differs fundamentally from the shifting dynamics of patriarchy in late-nineteenth-century Morocco. Beyond this historical divergence, any qualified application of critical fabulation must address Hartman's own warning against the "inevitable failure" of representation (Hartman 12) and the ethical risk of "replicat[ing] the very order of violence" for contemporary political desires (Hartman 14).

To avoid this, the novel's speculative project is best understood through what Casey describes as an "alternative knowledge production" (Casey 129) that shifts focus toward "the ordinary, day-to-day wants and needs" of the subjects (Casey 129). Therefore, applying Hartman's framework to the Moroccan context is a generative analogy, one that borrows Hartman's insistence on "exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive" (Hartman 11), a grammatical and narrative space of what could have been, to interrogate the limits of Moroccan historiography.

*Assembly of the Dead* performs precisely this labor and refuses to replicate the silence of the police reports. Through the imagination of the intimate interiorities, desires, and fears of her characters, Rouass "jeopardize[s] the status of the event to displace the received or authorized account" (Hartman 11). By reimagining the interior lives of these forgotten women, Rouass strains against the limits of the official archive to recount a history that was otherwise "doomed to oblivion" (Hartman 2).

This literary reclamation is crucial because, as Brahim Barhoun observes, the exclusion of women from the historical record is a form of "epistemic violence" that "distorts the historical record while reinforcing hegemonic narratives that delegitimize female ways of knowing" (Barhoun 53). In the novel, Farook al-Alami's investigation is not only a plot device but is an epistemological inquiry into the construction of truth in a fractured society. His insistence on the need for "evidence he could touch, smell, measure and trace" (Rouass 199) dramatizes the struggle to produce historical knowledge against a system designed to suppress it. Ultimately, the novel suggests that knowledge of the past is not a passive reception of established facts but an ethical engagement with the silences left behind by power.

The engagement with the past is further complicated by Rouass's position as a diasporic writer, which allows her to perform what Claire Chambers calls a "multisensory intervention"

into the historical record (Chambers 255). In her analysis of British Muslim fiction, Chambers argues that postcolonial narratives often challenge the dominant, rationalist frameworks of the West, which traditionally prioritize the visual, by recovering "alternative form[s] of knowledge from that of reason-based thought" (255). Rouass utilizes this strategy to re-map 1906 Marrakesh; she transforms it from a static diplomatic stage into a visceral, living environment. She resists the Enlightenment epistemology where "reason and sight were privileged" (Chambers 74). Instead, she insists on a history that is "physical, concrete, and multisensory" (255) to assert that the truth of the colonial encounter is found not just in treaties, but in the embodied experiences of those who lived through it.

This approach constitutes a significant diasporic intervention into the genre of the historical novel. Chambers observes that for many contemporary writers, the novel form itself is "impure, as blended and mixed... as a spiced Bombay curry, into which all the influences of a continent have been poured" (155). Rouass embraces this impurity, casting Farook al-Alami as a figure who embodies this blend. He is not a purely rationalist detective in the Sherlock Holmes tradition, nor is he solely bound by local mysticism; rather, he navigates a "connective dissonance" (32) between these worlds. His investigation requires him to acknowledge that "smell may be the sense that most otherizes" (76) in the colonial imagination, while simultaneously using his own senses to uncover the truth that European forensic science cannot detect.

Furthermore, the narrative validates what Chambers describes as the subjugated knowledges of the diaspora. Through this focus on the sensory texture of Marrakesh, *Jamaa el-Fnaa*, that is to say the assembly of the dead, becomes a site where "*zauq* (taste)" and other senses function as a "physical, not abstract" way of knowing the past (255). In doing so, Rouass does not solve a crime; she restores the sensory dignity of the victims, and she shows that a diasporic novel can offer a "more sensual way of knowing" (255) that disrupts the monochrome certainty of official history.

## The Trope of the Nation-as-Woman, Gender-Unaware Histories, and the Named Women of Marrakesh

Postcolonial theory widely acknowledges the pervasive trope of women-as-nation, where female figures often become symbolic bearers of national culture and tradition. Elleke Boehmer highlights how nationalism, particularly in its early anti-colonial phase, frequently invoked gendered forms to imagine nations into being (Boehmer 4). Boehmer discusses how the nation is "embodied as woman" and how this is often linked to patriarchal forms (Boehmer 35). Partha Chatterjee further distinguishes between a secular, masculine political sphere and a traditional cultural sphere, typically presided over by women, thereby positioning women as symbolic anchors rather than active political agents (Chatterjee 120). This conceptualization often results in women being objectified by the nation, with their roles confined to the domestic while the normative citizen is implicitly defined as male.

In 1906 Morocco, facing the critical Algeciras Conference and European domination, the nation stands on the precipice of losing its sovereignty. Rouass explicitly invokes suggestive vocabulary (penetration) and the idea of the nation as a body to be conquered:

> […] the French liked to call it 'peaceful penetration,' a phallic expression designed to further insult the young Sultan no doubt. And yet here in Marrakesh, the city residents seemed happy to busy themselves with minor distractions and conspiracies. He couldn't help but question why he had been sent to the city to search for women already

> forgotten, while further north and just across the Straits, the nation was being *peacefully penetrated.* (18)

Even if it is tempting to read the female victims solely as allegories for a besieged Morocco, Mary E. John's critique of "representation" warns against such reductive readings. John critiques the tendency in both Western and nationalist discourse to turn the "Third World Woman" into a static symbol—a site where the "Nation" or "Culture" is debated—thereby erasing her specific, material existence (John 109). If women are treated as metaphors for the raped nation, a second violence is committed against them; first they were silenced by the historical archive, and now they are silenced by the weight of literary symbolism. Rouass, however, navigates this ethical trap by engaging in what John calls a "politics of location." Nowhere is this clearer than in the Prologue, where Assiya is given a voice that is not just a cry of pain, but a complex articulation of desire. In her final letter, she writes: "I see two roads ahead of me, [...] I have never seen the ocean. People talk about it the way they talk about freedom" (Rouass 12). By giving Assiya this inner life, Rouass insists on her historical specificity. She shows that before these women were national victims, they were individuals with private schemes and desires that the history of the 1906 crisis had ignored.

While the masculine political sphere frets over the Algeciras Conference, where the nation was treated as a "stuffed goat, waiting to be carved by a dozen sharpened knives," the actual bodies of women were being systematically erased by Mesfewi (Rouass 225). This juxtaposition exposes the inherent fallacy of the national body metaphor; nationalism often prioritizes the symbolic integrity of the borders over the material safety of the people who inhabit them. The gendered imagining of the nation often requires women to serve as, in Eliot's words, "the still point of the turning world" (Eliot 192), a domestic anchor that remains static while the male citizen navigates the storms of life. Rouass shatters this stillness. By centering the disappearances, she forces the reader to confront the reality that when the nation is imagined as a woman to be defended, the literal women within it are often rendered invisible, their deaths mere "minor distractions" in the shadow of imperial loss (Rouass 18).

The metaphorical collapse of women into nation constitutes what Anne McClintock terms a "double jeopardy," wherein female subjects are conscripted into nationalist narratives that simultaneously render them passive emblems and deny them political agency (McClintock 354). Yet Rouass refuses this conscription. The novel stages a friction between allegorical expectation and irreducible particularity. She demonstrates that recovering silenced voices need not—must not—replicate the structures that silenced them. The danger lies in what Boehmer identifies as the gendered logic of nationalist representation, whereby women's bodies become territories upon which male political struggles are waged (Boehmer 35). The detective's search for "women already forgotten" (Rouass 18) while the nation faces penetration might initially seem to reproduce this very logic. But Rouass subverts it through sustained attention to what exceeds the national frame. The disappeared women become images of freedom untethered from nationalist discourse, a private cosmography that cannot be conscripted into the story of Morocco's sovereignty crisis. The novel thus enacts a doubled excavation. It retrieves these women from historical oblivion while simultaneously refusing to bury them anew beneath the weight of national allegory. In her novel, Rouass allows them to remain excessive, their desires and schemes irreducible to the geopolitical theater that consumed them, and this constitutes perhaps the text's most radical intervention.

The individuation of the victims by Rouass dismantles the discursive cage that Chandra Talpade Mohanty identifies as the "production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject" (Mohanty 51). Mohanty argues that colonial and Western feminist discourses often homogenize women in the Global South into a "coherent group" defined solely

by their shared status as victims—powerless, exploited, and sexually vulnerable—thereby erasing their specific histories and agencies (Mohanty 56). In *Assembly of the Dead*, both the Moroccan authorities and European observers attempt to impose this "discursive colonization" (51-52) upon the missing women, dismissing them as an interchangeable mass of runaways or prostitutes. However, Rouass disrupts this reductive categorization by forcing the detective, Farook, to encounter the bodies not as statistics, but as specific individuals. The narrative lingers on the jarring details of their adornment, which resist the attempts to anonymize them. As Farook examines a victim, the monolithic category of the dead girl collapses under the weight of her specific, aestheticized reality:

> He lifted her head gently and pulled her long light brown hair from beneath her. He brushed it through with his fingers and laid it on her right shoulder. Picking up a clay bowl he meticulously laced white jasmine bulbs through her hair so that she wore a crown of flowers. They would blossom in her grave and release a fragrance to sweeten her sleep. (Rouass 110)

By focusing on this sensory conflict—the "scent of jasmine" (the individual life) versus the stench of death (the collective fate)—Rouass refuses to let the victim dissolve into the abstract category of the powerless woman. Instead, she demands that the reader acknowledge the "simultaneous pluralities" (Mohanty 72) of a life that was both tenderly adorned and brutally extinguished.

Rouass meticulously portrays the individual lives and circumstances of the missing women. She moves beyond their collective victimhood to explore their distinct personalities and aspirations. The recovery of the marginalized voices commences with a direct challenge to the systemic devaluation of female lives within the state apparatus. The disparity between the initial reported cases and the final discovery of thirty-six bodies exposes a profound institutional apathy within the *makhzan*, which dismissed these disappearances as minor domestic departures. Rouass dismantles this neglect by attributing distinct desires and micro-narratives to the victims. Assiya exhibits a rich interiority through her illicit romance and her deep-seated desire for freedom, which she compares to the ocean (12). Similarly, Souad exercises spatial agency as her father's trusted market negotiator (55), while Maryam harbors a secret life of personal adornment symbolized by her "very fine jewellery" worn under her malhaf (81). Leila orchestrates her own temporary freedom in Jamaa el-Fnaa by a deliberate separation from her younger brother to facilitate a clandestine rendezvous (106). Even Latifa, though vulnerable to the cobbler's deception, possesses a unique material trace in her cheap silver necklace (109). Through these specific details, the narrative demonstrates that these women are not monolithic victims, but active subjects whose private actions represent a quiet defiance against patriarchal containment. By rescuing these intimate, domestic realities from historical oblivion, Rouass's creative project aligns with contemporary Moroccan literary efforts aimed at, as Latifa Labsir states, "...making voices visible, preserving everyday experience, and creating spaces where women's lives are taken seriously as knowledge" (Ben Talha and Barhoun 106).

The narrative also mentions other missing women: Breem, Lubna, Dunya, Marwa, Warda, and Malika. These women, despite their varied backgrounds and ages, are connected by their engagement with the public sphere, albeit often hidden, and their subtle acts of defiance against the restrictive norms imposed on them. Assiya's secret affair, Maryam's hidden jewelry, and Leila's deliberate separation from her brother all suggest a pursuit of personal desires and freedoms that challenge traditional expectations of female conduct in 1906 Marrakesh. Even

Souad, seemingly the most traditional, exercises agency through her intelligence in the marketplace.

These subtle acts of subversion or defiance are not only plot devices but also represent a form of nascent agency, where women seek personal freedoms despite societal constraints. El Guabli argues that ordinary women must be recognized not as passive bystanders but as history makers whose daily struggles constitute a vital, yet often overlooked, form of political agency (El Guabli 59). While Rouass's novel occupies a different historical era, the women's actions, such as seeking love outside marriage and adorning themselves for secret meetings, reflect a similar push against traditional boundaries. These acts, often undertaken in secrecy, underline the limited avenues for female agency in a patriarchal society and demonstrate an individualistic freedom that challenges the traditional public sphere.

Rouass's narrative strategy counters the historical tendency to reduce female victims to anonymous figures; she transforms them from nameless victims into complex characters. This approach resonates with Brahim El Guabli's call for a more "gender-conscious" historiography that acknowledges women as "history makers" (El Guabli 58-59).

Brahim El Guabli's critique of "gender-unaware history" is essential to this study's analysis of Rouass's intervention. El Guabli argues that despite the existence of rich, gendered literature in Morocco, historians have demonstrated almost "no interest in gender," a methodological blind spot that effectively creates its own "forgottens" within the historical record (El Guabli 62-63). *Assembly of the Dead* redresses this historiographical silence; where official narratives might dismiss the missing women as being "of ill-repute" or assume they had simply "run off to Mogador or Tangier" (Rouass 15), the novel engages in a critical re-evaluation of these patriarchal assumptions.

El Guabli further elucidates that the exclusionist tendency is not merely accidental but structural; he notes that even when historians attempt to reconstruct the past, they frequently privilege the "nationalist movement" and "political and social movements" while relegating women's distinct experiences of political violence to the periphery, effectively rendering them the "biggest forgottens" of the national narrative (El Guabli 62). To bypass these gender-blind conventions, Rouass engages in what El Guabli describes as the creation of a "narrative reality" within the public sphere:

> Instead of writing *for* historians who may or may not reconstruct their stories in the future, these women wrote (or had their testimonies written) to create a narrative reality in the public sphere. By narrative reality, I mean stories that exist in social and cultural memory and give public validity to the voices of the victims of state violence. Testimony has the power to create this narrative reality because of the truth claims embedded in its very meaning. (65)

Just as Moroccan women during the Years of Lead had to "conquer" public space to force their stories into the collective memory, refusing to wait for academic historians to validate their suffering, Rouass's novel forces the reader to inhabit the narrative reality of the 1906 victims. In doing so, she disrupts the monopoly of political history, such as the Algeciras Conference, and elevates the experience of violence to historical significance. This aligns with El Guabli's central warning: that a history which remains silent on the suffering of women "lays the ground for the repetition of violence" (75). Rouass's literary intervention acts as a preventative witness, ensuring the blood and belonging of these women are not erased by the idealizations of the state. El Guabli contends that such "historiographical ignorance" (El Guabli 59) is not merely an academic oversight but a social failure:

> This ignorance of women by historians rather prevents future generations of Moroccans from appreciating the sacrifices of women that made theirs a better present. History, unlike any other discipline, is linked to the identity of a society, and it is through history that people learn about their heroes, founding myths, and the shared ethos that bond them together. (75)

Finally, in excluding women from the narrative, the nation denies its own founding myths and distorts its collective self-understanding. Rouass's novel thus operates as a necessary corrective to the "historical silences" (62) produced by historians who, despite enjoying the "theoretical freedom" (62) to explore taboo topics, continued to give women "short shrift" (62). In assembling these forgotten figures, Rouass allows the "voices of the victims" to "invade Clio's Kingdom" (64), effectively asserting that these women were not passive bystanders to the nation's crisis, but "history makers" (59) whose erasure renders any history of the period incomplete.

> By overlooking Moroccan women and excluding them from the history of the present […] Moroccan historiography forsook a rare opportunity to place women at the heart of public and academic attention. Accounting for Moroccan women's experiences and survival of state violence would have placed their testimonies at the center of the discussions and would have been an important stride toward the unsettling of misogyny and patriarchy. (75)

The novel challenges the homogenizing potential of historical narratives that reduce diverse experiences to abstract categories or types. Rouass emphasizes that murdered women are given names and agency: "they too were characters, and not just nameless victims" (Rouass, "Diaspo"). Where abstract, "gender-unaware" histories would render the murdered women invisible, Rouass gives them names and specific life stories. Through this specific act of naming the victims, the narrative illustrates that "fabulation is a practice of interrogating, challenging, and reconfiguring the archival systems that structure who and what matters enough to be made legible" (Lapp 126). By detailing the distinct circumstances of Assiya, Souad, Maryam, Leila, and others, the novel insists on their unique personhood. This act of individualization is a counter-narrative that humanizes their tragedy and compels the reader to see them not as types, but as people.

## Farook al-Alami: The Hybrid Detective and the Pursuit of Justice

Initially tasked with investigating a few missing women, Farook gradually uncovers a far larger pattern of disappearances. His investigation reveals not just a serial killer but also the deep-seated "incompetence" and "apathy" of the *makhzan* (Rouass 24, 54, 73), which Rouass describes as being "bloated with officials who sat apathetically sipping mint tea in their plush homes" (14). This corruption extends to political exploitation, as the Caliph Moulay Hafid uses the crisis to "incite fear" and "magnify the rottenness of the banquet" for political gain against his brother, the Sultan (136, 214). Farook comes to see the women's lives as "meaningless," used as "currency" in a larger power struggle (194). His shift in motivation from solving the crime to an "obsession to know the man responsible" and "why" (204) reflects a deeper, systemic inquiry into the roots of violence and societal pathology, which moves beyond mere criminal detection. Farook's presence in the narrative does not compete with the recuperation

of female agency; rather, his investigative gaze is mobilized by Rouass to reconstruct the social lives of the victims.

Farook al-Alami belongs to a growing class of Moroccan officials tasked with navigating new diplomatic horizons; however, within the economy of the novel, his hybridity functions not as an end in itself, but as a supporting interpretive device. His liminal position is revealed by his distinctive European fashion, particularly his Italian shoes, which he prefers over the local *baboush* (25), and his fluent English, which he mastered by reading Tangier's English newspapers and traveling to London as a Sultan's envoy. He is an outsider in manner as well as origin, abstaining from the staple of Moroccan hospitality, mint tea. He applies methodical European investigative techniques to challenge the corrupt and brutal methods of the local authorities. It is this position, "much like that point where the two oceans met, not completely of one or the other, destined to forever swim between the two" (Rouass 261), that grants him a critical perspective and allows him to perceive the systemic devaluation of women that insiders are blind to.

Farook mirrors the epistemological crisis of 1906 Morocco. He is a man of the *makhzan* yet deeply influenced by the very powers threatening that state. His investigation is constantly hampered not just by the killer, but by his own liminality. As Saeida Rouass writes on the back cover of her novel:

> Morocco, 1906. A country caught between the lure of European luxuries and the powerful call of tradition. ... Farook enters Marrakesh on the orders of the Sultan. But, with the city on the brink of chaos from famine and fear, he must rely on his own intuition.

Farook's intuition is a hybrid faculty, forged in the tension between his Moroccan heritage and his exposure to European forensic methods. His inability to swiftly solve the crimes mirrors the paralysis of the Moroccan state, which attempts to modernize (adopting European policing or diplomatic styles) yet finds itself "on the brink of chaos." Rouass employs the detective genre not to solve a crime, but to expose the impossibility of solving the colonial encounter. Farook's gaze, often turned towards the "lure of European luxuries," implicates the Moroccan elite in the very "penetration" they seek to resist. He is, in another sense, investigating his own complicity in the nation's unraveling.

This identity crisis reflects the broader cultural dissonance in Morocco at the turn of the century as it grappled with Western encroachment. Farook, as a man of mixed identity, is not fully embedded in either Moroccan tradition or the colonial mindset, which gives him a critical distance from the city's problems. He is not blinded by the loyalties and assumptions that prevent insiders like Yusuf and Qadi Abdullah from recognizing the rot within the *makhzan.* This allows him to perceive the official corruption and the systemic disregard for women that insiders are too complicit to acknowledge.

Farook's investigative approach, influenced by European police work (e.g., "criminalistics," "speaking pictures," "dactylography") (Rouass 52, 59-62), stands in contrast to the apathetic and traditional methods of the *makhzan*. His insistence on facts and evidence over assumptions and coercion symbolizes a rational approach to justice. This methodological clash allegorizes Morocco's broader struggle to adapt to modern systems. Farook's commitment to justice and truth in a context where these values are fluid and manipulated by political power highlights the inherent tension between universal ethical principles and localized political expediency. His unwavering pursuit of the truth, even when it puts him at odds with the Qadi Abdullah al-Hassani and the Pasha Hajj Abdeslam al-Wazy, demonstrates his adherence to a moral concept of justice. However, the political landscape of 1906 Morocco, with its "unquenchable thirst for

money and power" (Rouass 14) and the Caliph's exploitation of the crisis for "political gain" (136), constantly undermines his efforts.

Farook's reliance on Western forensic science can be critically examined through the lens of what Mary E. John terms "composite theories." In *Discrepant Dislocations*, Mary E. John argues that Western "universal theories" are actually "partial theories" (John 13), deeply rooted in the specific historical location of the West. When these theories travel to the postcolony, they cannot simply be applied as-is; they must be stitched together with local knowledge to form a "composite" understanding of reality (John 29). Farook embodies the struggle of this composite intellectual. He attempts to impose the partial theory of European criminology onto the discrepant reality of 1906 Marrakesh. This tension is clearly seen when Farook attempts to categorize the missing women using the rigid, empirical tools of the London Metropolitan Police, only to have Yusuf mock him. His journey, therefore, is an epistemological one. As John suggests, the postcolonial subject must navigate discrepant registers of meaning. Farook finds that his Western science is insufficient to capture the specific, violent texture of the Moroccan crisis. By the end of the novel, he is forced to acknowledge that the "universal" science of the West is limited when applied to a discrepant location.

Farook's character is the means through which Rouass critiques the patriarchal and corrupt Moroccan establishment. His empathy for the victims and their families, his refusal to engage in torture, and his commitment to justice for all stand in direct opposition to the *makhzan*'s self-serving and gender-unaware practices. He becomes a "torchbearer of change" (Rouass, "Diaspo"), albeit one operating within a system resistant to such progress.

His investigative gaze functions as a narrative instrument of exhumation, meticulously recovering the irreducible particularity of the victims from the state's reductive indifference. Rather than participating in the *makhzan*'s clinical dismissal of the women as interchangeable statistics, Farook utilizes a somatic attention to detail to breathe life into a history that has been systematically purged of female presence. His role is thus to restore the humanizing textures of the lives of the missing women, ensuring they remain felt presences within the city's red dust.

Farook's methodology further enacts this recovery by mentally reconstructing the human presence of the victims in the absence of archival evidence. Lacking literal photographs, Farook "allowed his imagination to run away, piecing together an image of Souad... Short, he decided, with a small frame, dark brown eyes and thin lips permanently turned down" (62). The characterization of Souad here is not merely descriptive but is a narrative choice to grant her a "space of possibility" (Meretoja 69). By focusing on her "small frame" and "dark brown eyes," Rouass uses the detective's point of view to restore a distinct personhood to a victim who had been reduced to a footnote of "ill-repute" (15). This imaginative act mirrors Rouass's own restorative project, where Farook's internal monologue—asking Souad "'Why did you not complete all of your errands, Souad?' [...] 'Did something or someone stop you or was it by choice?'" (62)—grants the victim a nascent agency that challenges her archival erasure.

These moments of investigative attention reveal that Farook's true pursuit of justice is not found in the "brutal public death" of the killer (251). Indeed, in a setting where "The restoration of order and the implementing of justice, then, can mean the effacement of the dead" (Mills 149), Farook's quest has instead resided in the preservation of the opacity of subaltern consciousness. By naming and granting presence through these sensory and imaginative reconstructions, Rouass demonstrates that the detective's gaze is a tool designed to honor the space these women were meant to occupy in Moroccan memory. The focus remains steadfastly on the victims; Farook is the interpretive vehicle who ensures that characters like Souad remain excessive to the geopolitical theater of 1906.

In the end, by focusing on the extinguished potential of the murdered women, Rouass highlights the lost futures of the nation itself. *Assembly of the Dead*, by exposing the rottenness and corruption within the *makhzan*, uses the historical crime as a diagnostic tool to analyze the internal weaknesses that made Morocco vulnerable to colonial penetration. The serial killings become a symptom of this internal sickness, prefiguring the nation's eventual loss of sovereignty.

## Conclusion

Rouass's diasporic perspective, by projecting the homeland into her work, creates a transnational practice of memory that transcends boundaries and offers a model for how the diasporic position can enrich and complicate national historical narratives. By writing in English and addressing an international audience, Rouass fosters a transnational dialogue about colonial legacies and gendered violence.

*Assembly of the Dead* does not merely offer an allegorical reflection of Moroccan sovereignty on the eve of colonial partition. Rather, the novel uses the historical serial murders of Marrakesh as a precise analytical wedge to deconstruct the gendered politics of national crisis. This article has shown that Rouass's specific intervention lies in her refusal to let these women's deaths serve as passive metaphors for territorial loss. Instead, the narrative exposes a more insidious domestic reality: how both the *makhzan*'s sovereign anxieties and the European powers' "peaceful penetration" operate through a shared, structural disregard for subaltern female life. The serial killings are thus reframed not as a grand premonition of national collapse, but as a localized diagnostic of how patriarchal power—both local and colonial—colludes to render marginalized women expendable in moments of geopolitical transition.

Ultimately, the novel's significance rests on its capacity to expose the toxic convergence of colonial pressure, local patriarchy, and archival silence in the representation of women's deaths. By setting the narrative against the backdrop of the Algeciras Conference, Rouass highlights how colonial encroachment pressure-cooks domestic politics and turns female bodies into currency for masculine power struggles. Simultaneously, the indifferent, corrupt responses of local *makhzan* officials reveal an entrenched local patriarchy that relies on the spatial and social containment of women to maintain its fragile authority. This dual violence is sealed by the archival silence that reduced thirty-six human lives to a bloodless, collective statistic. By restoring names, interiorities, and desires to these figures, the novel reveals that these deaths are not isolated anomalies, but the direct product of a structural erasure where state-level historiography and patriarchal neglect intersect.

## Works Cited

Barhoun, Brahim. "Magical Feminism as Ontological Resistance in Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms*." *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 1, 2025, pp. 53-71. https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol1iss1.5016.

Ben Talha, Ikram, and Brahim Barhoun. "On Writing Identity and Difference in Moroccan Literature: An Interview with Latifa Labsir." *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2026, pp. 98-112. https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss2.8288.

Boehmer, Elleke. *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*. Manchester University Press, 2005.

Casey, Olive J. "Imagining the (Extra)ordinary: History Without Archives in Saidiya Hartman's Critical Fabulation." *Black(ness) in German African Studies*, edited by Stephanie Lämmert and Serawit Bekele Debele, De Gruyter, 2025, pp. 119-34. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111446721-008.

Chakrabarti, Turni. "'History from Below': Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* as Postcolonial Historical Fiction." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 26-29. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48679478.

Chambers, Claire. *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press, 1993.

Chay, Augustine. "The Ruins of Referentiality: Allegorical Realism and Traumatic Fragments in *Scorpion Orchid* and *The Search*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 57, no. 5, 2021, pp. 680-93. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2021.1953114.

Dalley, Hamish. *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the Representation of Contested Pasts.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137450098.

El Guabli, Brahim. "Gender-Unaware History: Ordinary Women as the Forgottens of Moroccan Historiography of the Present." *Journal of Applied Language and Culture Studies*, no. 2, 2019, pp. 57-78.

Eliot, T. S. *Four Quartets*. *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, Faber and Faber, 1963.

Fairfield, Paul. *Historical Imagination: Hermeneutics and Cultural Narrative.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2022.

Gámez Fuentes, María José, and Rebeca Maseda García. "Nostalgia and the Dialectics of Contemporary Feminisms in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2021, pp. 77-93. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.48.1.0077.

Guest, Charlotte. "Contemporary Historical Fiction and Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves*." *Antipodes*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2020, pp. 200-16. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48678308.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1.

John, Mary E. *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory, and Postcolonial Histories*. University of California Press, 1996. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.2430418.

Lapp, Jessica M. "'The Only Way We Knew How': Provenancial Fabulation in Archives of Feminist Materials." *Archival Science,* vol. 52, 2023, pp. 117-36. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-021-09376-x.

Lee, Yoon Sun. "Vection, Vertigo, and the Historical Novel." *Novel*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2019, pp. 179-99. https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-7546708.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Routledge, 1995.

Meretoja, Hanna. "Hermeneutic Awareness in Uncertain Times: Post-Truth, Narrative Agency, and Existential Diminishment." *The Use and Abuse of Stories*, edited by Hanna Meretoja and Mark Freeman, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 55-85. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571026.003.0004.

Mills, Rebecca. "Victims." *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper, Routledge, 2020, pp. 149-58. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429453342.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by Chandra

Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 51-80.

Pernau, Margrit. "Decolonizing Theory and Concepts: Perspectives from the Global South." *History and Theory,* vol. 64, no. 2, 2025, pp. 265-80. https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12384.

Rouass, Saeida. *Assembly of the Dead*. Impress Books, 2017.

---. "Diaspo: Saeida Rouass, from East London to a Historical Novelist in Love with Morocco." *Yabiladi*, conducted by Latifa Babas, 4 July 2020, https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/95652/diaspo-saeida-rouass-east-london.html. Accessed 12 Nov. 2025.

Wallace, Diana. "Difficulties, Discontinuities and Differences: Reading Women's Historical Fiction." *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, edited by Katherine Cooper and Emma Short, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 206-20. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137283382_12.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# From Moroccan Jewish Memory to Israeli Settlement: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Palestinian Erasure in Yamit Armbrister's *One Moroccan Woman*

**Chaimae Belahrache and Brahim Barhoun**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.12178

**Chaimae Belahrache** Chaimae Belahrache is a PhD candidate and a member of the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural, and Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab (LLCIS) at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Tetouan, Morocco. Her research focuses on contemporary postcolonial Sephardic female writings and North African Jewish literature.

chaimae.belahrache@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6968-9926

**Brahim Barhoun** is a Professor of English Studies in the Department of English Language and Literature at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tétouan, Morocco. He holds a PhD in the Literature of English-speaking Countries from the Complutense University of Madrid. His research interests include postcolonial literature, narrative identity, migration, magical realism, and gender representations, with a focus on African and Arab literary contexts.

bbarhoun@uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6842-7950

Received: 03-01-2026 Accepted: 11-04-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# From Moroccan Jewish Memory to Israeli Settlement: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Palestinian Erasure in Yamit Armbrister's *One Moroccan Woman*

**Chaimae Belahrache and Brahim Barhoun**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

## ABSTRACT

This article offers a Palestine-centered reading of Yamit Armbrister's *One Moroccan Woman*, a Moroccan Jewish-Israeli novel that has not yet received sustained standalone analysis. The article argues that the novel produces settler countermemory, a form of minority recollection that recovers Moroccan Jewish-Muslim intimacy and exposes Ashkenazi racism while remaining complicit in Zionist erasures of Palestine. Drawing on Ella Shohat's critique of Arab-Jewish dislocation, Olivia C. Harrison's transcolonial reading of Maghrebi literature through Palestine, and recent work in settler colonial memory studies, the analysis follows Tamar Ben Zaken's movement from Marrakesh to Kiryat Gat as a process of de-Maghrebization and settlement incorporation. In Morocco, Tamar's Jewishness is formed through Muslim foster motherhood, Arabic sound, and shared domestic ritual; in Israel, that formation is cast as incompatible with full citizenship, while Palestinian presence is displaced into the language of intrusion and terra nullius. Sephardic displacement, the article shows, is redirected into Hebrew, labor, land, and state-building at the very site of Palestinian dispossession. The novel's political value lies in its unresolved contradiction; it remembers Morocco against Israeli erasure while muting the Palestinian history that made its Israeli chapters possible, and it thereby exposes the workings of the settler narrative it inhabits.

## KEYWORDS

**Moroccan Jews**

**Mizrahi Jews**

**Settler Countermemory**

**Palestine**

**Zionism**

**Arab Jews**

## Introduction

Yamit Armbrister's *One Moroccan Woman* seeks to recover Jewish Morocco through Muslim-Jewish symbiosis, Arabic music, and domestic ritual while narrating Palestine/Israel through the grammar of Zionism. This article treats the novel as a qualitative literary case study in the cultural production of ethnic identity under nation-building. Its central concept is settler countermemory. By this term, I mean a form of minority recollection that challenges one dominant narrative while participating in another structure of domination. Tamar's memories contest the Israeli erasure of Moroccan Jewish identity and the Ashkenazi degradation of Jews from Arab and Muslim lands. However, these memories are folded into a national meta-narrative that normalizes settlement, recodes Palestinian resistance as transgression, and neglects Palestinian dispossession. The article aims to read the ambiguity by which a displaced Moroccan Jewish migrant is made available to a settler project.

Scholarship on Maghrebi Jewish writing has often been organized around exile, nostalgia, deterritorialization, and the recovery of Jewish-Muslim social worlds. Work by Emanuela

Contact ✉ chaimae.belahrache@etu.uae.ac.ma ✉ bbarhoun@uae.ac.ma
©2026

Trevisan Semi, Aomar Boum, Sarah Frances Levin, Judith Roumani, and the contributors to Dario Miccoli's *Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature* emphasizes that North African Jewish writing repeatedly returns to cities, family objects, language, domestic memory, food, and ritual in order to repair the ruptures produced by migration. Semi's work is especially useful because she identifies Jewish-Moroccan-Israeli lifewriting as a field of double or multiple belonging, in which Israel does not end exile but intensifies attachment to Morocco. Recent scholarship has widened this field. Dario Miccoli's *A Sephardi Sea* traces how memories of migration and exile anchor Sephardi and Mizrahi identities across the modern Mediterranean, Emily Benichou Gottreich's *Jewish Morocco* resituates Jewish life inside Moroccan history rather than apart from it, and Aviad Moreno and Haim Bitton show how community memoirs written by Moroccan immigrants in Israel answered Ashkenazi stereotyping with communal self-narration. Yet this scholarship often leaves the Palestinian dimension underdeveloped. To say that Moroccan Jews remember Morocco against Israeli erasure is necessary, but it is not enough. One must also ask where this memory is relocated and whose history disappears when Moroccan Jews are made Israeli.

Ella Shohat's work remains central to this reading because it shows that Zionism produces the Mizrahim by detaching Jews from Arab and Muslim worlds and by urging them to identify primarily as Jews within a Euro-Israeli hierarchy. Olivia C. Harrison's *Transcolonial Maghreb* further shows how Palestine becomes a test case for Maghrebi decolonization, Arab-Jewish memory, and the colonial separation of Arabness from Jewishness. Armbrister's novel stages this rupture through Aziza, the Muslim foster mother associated with care, while Palestinians near Kiryat Gat are rendered through the language of danger and infiltration.

The theoretical framework of this article brings Shohat's critique of Arab-Jewish dislocation into conversation with Harrison's transcolonial reading of Maghrebi literature through Palestine. Shohat provides the central vocabulary for reading Moroccan Jewish displacement as a transformation of identity, geography, and memory under Zionist nation-building. In "Rupture and Return," she shows that the ingathering of the exiles coincided "with the imaging of the empty land of Palestine," whose "indigenous inhabitants could be bracketed or, alternately, portrayed as intruders deemed to 'return' to their Arab land of origins" ("Rupture and Return" 49). Within the same rescue narrative, "the 'Diasporic Jews' had to abandon their diasporic culture, which, in the case of Arab Jews, meant abandoning Arabness," while concepts of "ingathering" and "modernization" "naturalized and glossed over the historical, psychic, and epistemological violence generated by the Zionist vision of the New Jew" (49). Her formulation is crucial because it treats Mizrahi identity as a historical production, formed through movement into Israel and through the dismemberment of earlier Judeo-Arab and Judeo-Muslim affiliations. Moroccan Jewish identity in *One Moroccan Woman* therefore becomes legible through the tension between lived Maghrebi belonging and Israeli national incorporation. Tamar's attachment to Muslim neighbors, Arabic sound, domestic ritual, and Moroccan place-memory registers the older world that the Israeli state later asks her to abandon. Shohat's hyphenated Arab-Jew clarifies what is at stake. The aim of hyphenation is "to call into question the Eurocentric nationalist paradigm that erased the hyphen and made it taboo" (*Taboo Memories* 336), whereas Zionist incorporation redirects Jewish identity into a state narrative that suppresses other pasts, languages, and lands.

Harrison supplies the transcolonial dimension of this argument by placing the Arab-Jewish rupture within the wider question of Palestine. Her essay "Rethinking 'Jews' and 'Arabs' through Palestine" reads Maghrebi writers for whom Palestine is the site where the colonial legacies opposing "Jews" and "Arabs" in the Maghreb become visible and contestable. Her reading of Edmond Amran El Maleh is especially instructive. She suggests that El Maleh

compares Moroccan Jews in Israel to Palestinians, presenting both as victims of anti-Arab hatred and discrimination (22). El Maleh's fiction mounts what Irene Siegel calls "a continuum of Judeo-Arab-Muslim affiliation" that directly challenges "the European, and by extension Zionist, discursive and political formations that would alienate these terms from one another" (18); in *A Thousand Years, One Day*, his protagonist "believed the doors of the Promised Land shall open and welcome him with great opportunities . . . a cruel disillusion . . . he was an Arab after all" (qtd. in Hochberg 27). Where Albert Memmi came to reject the Arab-Jewish hyphen, El Maleh writes against that irreversibility. This constellation bears directly on *One Moroccan Woman*, where Moroccan Jewish memory is recovered through Aziza, Muslim domestic care, Arabic music, and Moroccan ritual, while Palestine is narrated through danger, infiltration, empty land, and biblical return. The framework of this article therefore reads Armbrister's novel through a double lens. Shohat explains how Arab-Jews become Mizrahim inside Israel, while Harrison shows why that transformation must be read through Palestine. Together, they make it possible to examine Tamar's Moroccan Jewish memory as a countermemory that contests Ashkenazi erasure while remaining entangled in a settlement narrative that displaces Palestinian history.

The concept of settler countermemory also builds on settler colonial studies. Patrick Wolfe's influential account frames settler colonialism as a structure of native elimination rather than a discrete event, and Areej Sabbagh-Khoury's study of kibbutz archives shows that settler memory can work through recognition and disavowal rather than simple forgetting. Within this structure, Mizrahim occupy what Giulia Daniele calls an in-between position, incorporated into the settler project while marginalized inside it, and Yehouda Shenhav shows that the category of the Arab Jews was itself produced at the meeting point of nationalism, religion, and ethnicity.

This article uses three linked concepts: de-Maghrebization, the Arab-Jewish rupture, and settler countermemory. De-Maghrebization names the process through which Moroccan Jews are forced to abandon the languages, domestic customs, and Jewish-Muslim proximities through which their Jewishness was historically lived. Brahim Barhoun's reading of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay offers the related figure of "amputation" for this transformation, describing the conversion of the North African "Jewish Muslim" into a French or Israeli national subject as a forcible severing from the Maghrebi body politic, while cautioning that this model can understate historical agency and idealize precolonial relations (150–53). The Arab-Jewish rupture names the colonial and Zionist production of Arabness and Jewishness as hostile identities. Settler countermemory names the paradoxical memory produced when a racialized minority remembers against one hegemonic narrative while being incorporated into another. Tamar's Moroccan memory counters Ashkenazi hegemony, but it does not automatically become anti-colonial. It contests the erasure of Moroccan Jews while legitimizing the erasure of Palestinians. The analysis therefore reads with and against Tamar's narration, treating the novel's emancipation rhetoric, terrorism, empty land, and national construction as ideological symptoms.

## Muslim Mothers, Jewish Daughters

Armbrister's *One Moroccan Woman* approaches the Moroccan past through female memory and domestic relationships. As an Israeli-born writer of Jewish-Moroccan descent, Armbrister revisits the uprooting of Moroccan Jews to Israel and the partial erasure of Maghrebi-Sephardic identity that follows it. The novel follows Tamar and Meir, a Moroccan Jewish couple whose departure from Morocco does not bring secure belonging in Israel, and whose failed adjustment to the Ashkenazi order exposes the distance between Zionist narratives of return and Moroccan Jewish experience. Through Tamar's memories of Moroccan Jewish-Muslim life, Armbrister

reconstructs a pre-Israeli Sephardic identity rooted in family, neighborhood relations, and female attachment.

Loosely based on Armbrister's grandmother's experience, the novel moves between Morocco and Israel in order to show the rupture between the two spaces. Like Gabriel Bensimhon and Galit Dahan Carlibach, Armbrister uses Judeo-Moroccan and Arabic terms, including "kuttab," "galabia," "tzadik," "nedunia," and "chena," to keep Jewish-Moroccan culture audible within the English narrative. These terms resist the Zionist-Ashkenazi model of a monolingual, monocultural Jewish identity and make clear that Sephardic identity in the novel is inseparable from the Muslim-Moroccan environment in which it is formed. They enact in miniature what Lital Levy calls writing between Hebrew and Arabic, and they resist the separatist imagination whose limits Gil Z. Hochberg has traced, in which "Jew" and "Arab" are made to appear as mutually exclusive identities. *One Moroccan Woman* depicts a social world in which intimacy, rivalry, affection, and difference coexist. The novel refuses to reduce Jewish-Muslim relations to persecution, yet it neither idealizes Morocco nor erases its hierarchical structures. In this respect, Armbrister's novel belongs to what Semi calls "the building of a counter-narrative" ("Lifewriting" 84). *One Moroccan Woman* thus writes against the occlusion of Jewish-Muslim-Maghrebi history in Israeli cultural discourse, reclaiming Jewish-Arab identities that Zionist ideology renders suspect.

After her mother's death, Aziza, the family's Muslim nanny, becomes a maternal figure for Tamar and her siblings. Her role exceeds domestic service as she enters the emotional structure of the Ben Zaken household. Tamar describes Aziza and her husband Abdul as nearly kin: "Aziza and Abdul were Muslims, but they were as close to us as family. They'd been with my family since the early stage of my parents' marriage, and now they were more committed than ever to the children they'd helped deliver. . . . Our house was always filled with Papa's Muslim friends and merchants" (Armbrister 1). Through Aziza, Tamar encounters Muslim-Moroccan spirituality from within the household rather than from a distance. The family home is also located near a mosque, and Tamar is constantly drawn to the call to prayer. The "deep voice" of "the muezzin" distracts her "worries for a brief moment" as she climbs "on top of the roof" to see the Kairaouine Mosque, which people describe as "the most beautiful mosque in the world" (11-12). Her attraction to the mosque implies no conversion; it marks a Jewishness formed in proximity to Muslim sound, architecture, and ritual.

The Ben Zaken household also functions as an interreligious social space. At Tamar's mother's funeral, Jewish and Muslim neighbors gather in the same house to mourn her loss. Tamar recalls that the house "was packed from room to room with family, friends, business people; Arab neighbors, city representatives, and anyone who wanted to join" (Armbrister 9). The novel affirms Jewish-Muslim difference while presenting that difference as part of social familiarity. Sarah Frances Levin's work on Moroccan Jewish and Muslim satire helps clarify this relation of Jewish-Muslim affinity and difference. She argues that Jewish and Muslim Moroccans often composed jokes, satires, and parodies about one another's customs, and that such verbal rivalry could be understood as an expression of "wit" rather than hatred. Muslim listeners, Levin writes, admired Jewish "wit and wordplay even as it was used against them," and some cases "were even viewed as expressions of affection" (81). This context helps explain Tamar and Aziza's exchanges, where mockery is a form of attachment.

The banter between Tamar and Aziza shows how religious difference can produce solidarity rather than separation. When Aziza forgets that Tamar cannot attend festivities during the year of mourning, "her face became red as if she insulted Mama's memory by forgetting the Jewish law" (Armbrister 6). She also jokes about the weight of Jewish law: "I've lived with your family for seventeen years and yet, I keep forgetting sometimes. But honest to god, Chabibty, you have

so many laws for everything. How can anyone live like this" (6). Tamar does not read this as hostility. The exchange belongs to a shared domestic language in which disagreement, teasing, and care coexist. As Levin observes, "[t]here was an ongoing and open rivalry between Muslims and Jews as to who were the true believers, with each crediting their own religion as superior, and holding a certain disdain for the other's" (65).

Aziza's motherhood complicates biological and religious definitions of family. Unable to have children of her own, she becomes a foster mother to Tamar and Sima, and her care produces a household shaped by two religions. Her attachment to the Ben Zaken children becomes one of the forms through which kinship is practiced. When Tamar asks Aziza about Israel and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Aziza remains politically neutral: "'I don't have the slightest idea about Israel. Only Allah knows if it's a good or bad idea,' she shrugged. 'All I know is that I hope you never leave'" (Armbrister 136). Semi's discussion of Moroccan responses to Jewish departure gives Aziza's reaction historical depth. Morocco, Semi argues, differed from other Arab countries because it placed importance on maintaining relations with its Jewish community, while the departure of Jews "shocked and startled the Muslim population" ("Double Trauma" 117). Aziza's fear of Tamar's departure gives this historical rupture a domestic form. When that departure finally occurs, Aziza and her Jewish foster daughters are devastated and traumatized: "Aziza was on the floor, kissing Sima repeatedly, but Sima's pleading cries hurt my chest, and I turned my face. My throat burned . . . Meir stepped in and pulled Sima from Aziza's arms . . . Aziza and Abdul just stood there, watching us disappear into the distance" (Armbrister 12-13). Meir must physically snatch the girls from Aziza's arms, a bodily figure for the severing of Morocco itself.

Tamar continuously defines Aziza through maternal devotion. Aziza remains with the Ben Zakens despite their grief and financial decline, and Tamar remembers her care as an act of loyalty: "It would've been easier in a different house, one that didn't have seven sad orphans. But she stayed, and that was her greatness. I always loved her for it, and have never forgotten her" (Armbrister 135). Later, Tamar returns to the same bond. "I thought of Aziza's last words that night. 'I will pay you back one day,' she said behind my back, as if her devotion to my family wasn't enough. I loved her like a mother" (135). Similarly, before Tamar's illegal migration to Israel, Aziza pleads with her Jewish foster daughter to stay in Morocco. When she becomes certain that Tamar is leaving, she begs: "I can't imagine life without you. . . . Please, take us with you" (19). These passages make Aziza central to Tamar's account of Moroccan life. The Muslim foster mother becomes the figure through whom Tamar remembers Morocco as a place of care, loss, and shared female survival (15).

Jewish and Muslim women's shared practices also appear in scenes of ritual celebration. During Tamar's wedding, Muslim and Jewish women put "Chena mix" on Tamar's palms and dance "for hours to the enchanting jaunty lyrics of Arabic music" (Armbrister 89). The wedding scene places Jewish ritual inside Moroccan social practice, where Arabic music, henna, and female gathering cross religious lines. The novel's treatment of motherhood, mourning, and domestic ritual redefines Jewish-Moroccan identity through Moroccan women's relations rather than through nationalist categories. A comparable gendered recovery appears in Ruth Knafo Setton's *The Road to Fez*, where homecoming, women's ritual, and Judeo-Moroccan mythology restore Sephardic female agency while unsettling colonial and Zionist divisions between Arabness and Jewishness (Belahrache and Barhoun, "Sephardic Female Odyssey" 86–89).

## From Homeland to Enemy

*One Moroccan Woman* presents Aliyah as a process of cultural severance imposed on Moroccan Jews in the twentieth century. The novel exposes the Zionist recoding of Moroccan Jews as exiles who must be redeemed from Arab lands and returned to Israel. Through Tamar's family, Armbrister unveils that the realization of this meta-narrative requires the weakening of Jewish-Muslim Moroccan ties and the redefinition of Morocco as a place of danger. In this sense, the novel reveals the fracture between "Jewishness" and "Maghrebiness" as a political construction.

Tamar's relationship with her Muslim neighbors is threatened by Zionist efforts to recast Muslims as enemies. Daniel, Tamar's first husband, embodies this ideological shift. As a Moroccan Jewish Zionist recruiter, he circulates narratives of Arab hostility and Jewish rescue in order to encourage immigration to Israel. He presents his work as sacred obligation:

> "It's a big Mitzvah to help bring the Jewish people to their ancestral land. But first, allow me to give you some background," he said, and I nodded. "We rely on Jewish donations from all over the World to fund the costs of maintaining this facility and the mass immigration," Daniel began. . . . "There are many people to save," he said, and his brows gathered together. I didn't say anything. I wasn't sure why we needed to be saved at all, and from whom. (Armbrister 36)

Tamar's final question is central to the novel's critique. Unlike Daniel, Tamar cannot see why Moroccan Jews must flee to Israel. She refuses to see her people, who are embedded in Moroccan life, as victims in need of salvation. Daniel's language of urgency and salvation collides with Tamar's hesitation, which exposes the gap between Zionist discourse and Moroccan Jewish experience.

The novel's fictional recruiter has a documented historical counterpart. Gottreich records that in Morocco the Zionist organization Kadima "operated under the guise of providing social services and a library" and facilitated the departure of thirty thousand Jews between 1949 and 1951, "mostly from the poorer communities" (163). Shohat likewise argues that "panic and disorientation, rather than desire for aliya . . . was the key factor" in the departures, generated in part by a Zionist policy of driving a wedge between Jewish and Muslim communities ("Rupture and Return" 56). Armbrister's Daniel dramatizes precisely this machinery of manufactured fear.

Daniel and Pnina present themselves as agents of Jewish emancipation, but their activism depends on the promotion of fear and impending Holocaust narratives. Shohat's critique of Zionism clarifies the structure of this narrative. Zionism, she argues, claimed "to be a liberation movement for all Jews," but it functioned primarily for European Jews, while Sephardi Jews were brought to Israel for "specific European-Zionist reasons" and then discriminated against by the same system ("Sephardim" 1).

Mr. Ben Zaken, Tamar's father, also resists the Zionist narrative of return because he views Morocco as a homeland. He rejects the idea that Moroccan Jews must abandon their ancestral place in order to become properly Jewish:

> Papa wouldn't listen to any of the Zionists calling to return and rebuild the land of Israel. . . . "Jews are safe in Morocco," he said to Avram Saadon, his childhood friend. "The Sultan loves the Jews. He wouldn't let anything bad happen to us. Look how the Sultan protected us against those Nazis," he said. . . . "I won't leave Morocco!" Papa said. "It's where my father, and his father's father are from, for generations. It's here

> where my loyalty lies. . . . We are classified as the Protected people of the sacred law of the Shari, and in the Quran." (Armbrister 12)

His rejection of the return narrative unsettles the Zionist premise that Jewish history culminates in Israel. For him, loyalty to Morocco does not contradict Jewish identity. His position also contests the Israeli claim, described by Shohat, that Ashkenazi Zionism "'saved' Sephardi Jews from the harsh rule of their Arab 'captors'" and moved them from "primitive conditions" into modernity ("Sephardim" 3). Armbrister's novel shows that this deliverance discourse requires the distortion of Moroccan Jewish belonging.

The Zionist movement in the novel also works through the language of emergency. Daniel repeatedly insists that Moroccan Jews must leave before it is too late:

> Either we'll be too late to save the Jews of Morocco, or Israel won't withstand Arab hostility from all four borders. . . . "Tamar, we're not perceived anymore as just the Jews of Morocco, but rather as a nation, a group of people that share a religion and identity," Daniel said. "We're now solidified with Israel wherever we are. The Agency is determined to act early this time before a second Holocaust occurs. . . . Most of the Jews that left are from the countryside." . . . "They're easier to convince because they have nothing to lose." (Armbrister 37-38)

Daniel's speech replaces Moroccan Jewish specificity with a universal Jewish nationhood tied to Israel. His reference to a "second Holocaust" imports the European catastrophe into Morocco to produce fear and compliance. The rural poor are described as "easier to convince" because their vulnerability makes them more susceptible to promises of liberation. Boum shows that Zionist success among the rural Jews of southern Morocco drew not only on hardship but on "traditional messianic Zionism" and on these communities' imagined connection to Palestine ("From 'Little Jerusalems'" 51-52). Armbrister therefore presents Zionist recruitment as a political pedagogy that trains Moroccan Jews to see Morocco as exile.

The novel connects this pedagogy to the creation of an Arab-Jew divide. Shohat writes that Zionism situated "Arabs and Jews . . . as enemy identities," whereas Arab Jews had previously been seen as colonized Arab subjects before the partition of Palestine recoded them as simply "Jews" (*Taboo Memories* 131). Daniel's argument follows this shift. He tells Tamar that Jews are no longer "just the Jews of Morocco" but part of a transnational Jewish identity "solidified with Israel" (Armbrister 37-38). This formulation erases the Moroccan component of Jewish life and defines belonging through Israel. Mr. Ben Zaken, under this pressure, refuses to accept that his happiness in Morocco is illegitimate: "I'm not against a Jewish state, but who guarantees that we'd be safer there than here. . . . I donate a lot of money to the cause, but I'm happy here" (13-14).

Daniel's recruitment work turns shared Jewish-Muslim history into an obstacle to be overcome. Recruiting Jojo as "my voice in the Mellah," he promises that in Israel "no one will discriminate against you for being Jewish," while he "travelled to remote Jewish villagers, helping them liquidate the villages of any Jewish presence" (Armbrister 49-59). The phrase reduces centuries of rural Jewish life to a logistical problem; the rhetoric of protection conceals an operation of removal, and the later Israeli chapters expose the promise of non-discrimination as false.

Armbrister also links Zionist silencing of Maghribinity to French colonial assimilation. Before Aliyah, the French Protectorate has already encouraged Moroccan Jews to identify with European culture and to distance themselves from Muslim society. Tamar acknowledges this change in her own family:

> . . . French presence in the urban cities influenced everyone, slowly changing the face of our society. Even Papa remarked that many families became more secular and modern, much as Meir and me. We preferred the French education and its culture to the Muslim one, thus assimilating the French ways gradually became a way of life for everyone, a life we'd embraced gladly. (Armbrister 46)

French schooling and culture prepare the ground for a separation between Moroccan Jews and Muslim Moroccans. Roumani maintains that "[t]he Sephardim of the French colonies distanced themselves more and more from their relations with Muslims and adopted the habits of Europeans" and that Alliance schools "contributed to the demise of the age-old relationship between Jews and Muslims" (216-17). Massoud Hayoun likewise contends that "transnational Judaism was not naturally intuitive to many Jewish Arabs" but was a framework introduced by Alliance schooling, so that Zionism exploited a rupture colonial education had already begun (166). In the novel, French colonial assimilation and Zionist nationalism both contribute to the weakening of Jewish-Muslim Moroccan bonds.

## "Ma'asalame": Colonial Distortion and the Dissolution of Moroccan Belonging

The Ben Zakens' departure is produced through the combined pressure of Moroccan decolonization, Zionist mobilization, and an emergency narrative that increasingly reduces Moroccan Jewish life to danger. Earlier scenes of Jewish-Muslim tolerance, contact, and friendship are therefore displaced by a narrative of fear. When the possibility of taking Aziza and Abdul to Israel is raised, Tamar contends that "the Jewish Agency didn't even consider such a ridiculous idea. There was hardly room or money to rescue the Jews, let alone elderly Muslim servants" (Armbrister 135). The language of redemption is reserved for Jews, while Abdul and Aziza, despite their intimate place in Tamar's household, are excluded from the moral economy of salvation. The agent assigned to Meir and Tamar promises that "the Israeli government will provide the housing," yet the family is betrayed by this promise in Israel (135). A Jewish eyewitness quoted by Gottreich called the departures "an exodus that no one truly desires," in which "the people are not fleeing Morocco, but their own misery" (164), a judgment the novel's Israeli chapters bear out.

Yet the narrator also acknowledges the role of the Ben Zakens' loyal Muslim servants in protecting the family from rising violence. Framed as parental figures, Abdul and Aziza save Tamar and her children from the fire, so the novel's movement toward fear never fully cancels its earlier world of attachment. Tamar "insisted on staying in Morocco" and "day-dreamed of Aziza's cooking" during her departure. Her dream of remaining there ends only when departure becomes unavoidable: "when the night faded away and morning crept in, so did my dreams of growing old in Morocco" (Armbrister 143). At the moment of departure, Tamar looks "back to the shore" and sees "a Muslim man" in traditional dress waving to her. She mouths "Ma'asalame," and Morocco becomes condensed into a Muslim presence that is familiar, mourned, and left behind (141-42). This structure of loss was not one-sided. In Boum's *Memories of Absence*, older Muslim informants recurrently remember Jewish departure as a social and economic loss. One elderly speaker recalls, "I wish Jews were still here," adding that when Jews left Akka, "we lost the thriving religious and economic center Akka used to be" (Boum, *Memories of Absence* xvii).

## "We Are Israelis Now": Palestinian Erasure and the Making of Moroccan Jews into Israelis

The Ben Zakens join other Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews on clandestine boats to Israel. The journey is harsh and dangerous, and disillusionment begins before the family reaches Israel. Yet arrival is still framed as the fulfillment of promise. Seeing Israel's shores from afar becomes a spiritual moment: "The cabin door opened. 'Israel's shores in the sea on the horizon,' the man shouted. 'You've never seen anything as beautiful as this in your life!' A great relief washed over me. For the first time, I anxiously awaited reaching Israel" (Armbrister 148). Tamar initially receives Israel as a new beginning and imagines it as the place where her family will finally settle. She declares, "I would learn to love Israel. We would raise our children there and grow old. It was our new home" (148). The sentence is important because Tamar does not yet speak from experience. She speaks from anticipation, from the Zionist promise that arrival will repair deterritorialization.

The arrival scene is filled with biblical language and Zionist mythmaking. The Ben Zakens and the other passengers are encouraged to read their arrival as the fulfillment of divine promise. Their migration is not presented as political settlement in a contested land, but as return, destiny, and religious completion:

> "It's a new start, my love. You will see. It will be great," he said. Everyone cried from happiness. Sixty people gazed at the approaching shores of Israel. A spontaneous circle of dancing broke. Men hugged each other, and children laughed. I felt close to those foreigners. We shared the same fate. We shared a human spirit. . . . "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion." . . . "Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west." . . . "God fulfilled his promise to us. It's our turn now to understand and believe his words." He wasn't being accusing. I envied his sense of purpose and faith. "Welcome home." . . . Then he covered his heart with the blue and white flag and kneeled to kiss the ground. I couldn't turn my eyes from him. (Armbrister 148)

The passage turns arrival into a collective religious rite. Tears, dancing, prayer, biblical quotation, the flag, and the kissed ground naturalize the passengers' presence in Israel and transform the immigrants into "New Jews" before they have entered the country. The language of promise and return conceals the political reality of Palestine. At no point does the novel name Palestinians as a people with prior claims to the land, and this absence shows how thoroughly the Zionist narrative organizes the terms through which Tamar is allowed to imagine Israel.

The faintest reference to Palestinians appears later, when Tamar and an Arab Jewish community settled near a Palestinian village become the targets of so-called Arab "Fedayeen" (Armbrister 168). Even here, Palestinians are not clearly named as Palestinians. Although the description of these fighters as armed resistance figures suggests Palestinian resistance, the novel labels them as "Jordanian." Palestine is therefore absent from the map, while Palestinians are displaced into other national labels. The land appears as Israel before the characters ever encounter it as Palestine, and Palestine itself is replaced with a biblical and national fantasy of return.

Similar to the narrative's demonization of the Moroccan independence movement, Palestinian resistance is presented in derogatory and dehumanizing terms. Palestinian fighters are cast as inherently violent transgressors who come "from outside of Israel," racially othered

bodies to be watched, contained, and eliminated, while the Ben Zakens appear as frightened victims in an isolated settlement:

> "We just need to pay attention, and be aware of possible Fedayeen attacks," he said. I stared at him confused, "Who?" "They're called Fedayeen - groups of infiltrators and terrorists that come in from outside of Israel to kill Jews. We need to arrange a guarding force and take turns at nights, just to make sure we're prepared if they attack here." A shiver ran along my spine. "I heard that some of them used to live in nearby areas. They're coming from Jordan to seek revenge," Meir said. . . . Someone should tell these attackers that we don't want to be here. (Armbrister 168)

The passage strips Palestinian resistance of its anti-colonial context and refigures it as irrational violence. Palestinians appear as an alien presence rather than a colonized and dispossessed people; they become trespassers and invaders instead of the invaded. Tamar and her family, by contrast, see themselves as rightful cultivators of the land, and Meir's guns turn him into a landowner defending his country rather than an occupier defending a colonial settlement. The passage therefore reproduces the Zionist reversal through which Palestinian resistance is criminalized while occupation is naturalized as self-defense.

This subversion also appears in the family's journey to Kiryat Gat. On their way there, Tamar notes, "None of us knew where Karyat-Gat was, but we knew we were headed south. We couldn't read the signs, they were either in Hebrew or English" (Armbrister 155). Arabic is absent from this linguistic field. The pre-existing Palestinian presence, architecture, and place-memory are similarly denied. Palestine is rendered as a vacant space waiting to be built by diasporic Jews, without the narrator ever acknowledging any history of Palestinian partition and eradication.

Kiryat Gat, the settlement project to which the Ben Zakens are sent in the novel's 1951 chronology, is not an empty frontier but a space made possible by Palestinian deracination. The immigrants are told that Kiryat Gat is "the city that will be created very soon" and that they will be "the first residents" who will "build it together" (Armbrister 164). The forced eviction of Palestinians and the destruction of their villages are completely effaced. The pre-existence of Palestinian villagers and the Palestinian geography upon which these settlements were built are occluded. Tamar looks up to the Ashkenazi settlers of Kibbutz Gat with admiration:

> The residents of Kibbutz Gat were entirely different, yet to be admired. Despite how different they were from us, I looked up to them. It was the first time I met Jews that originated from Eastern Europe, mostly Poland, Yugoslavia, and Austria. They were fundamentally different from any people I'd known, not only by appearance, but in customs as well. The Kibbutz was founded in 1942, and by now it was the only modern thing around us. It was well-established, with vineyards, a fishpond, a dairy factory, and a health clinic. They even had a swimming pool! The good thing was that we were only three kilometers south of them. I looked at them as the salt of the earth, and despite the fundamental cultural differences and language barriers, we managed to communicate, and collaborate when needed. (Armbrister 171)

The ethnic cleansing of Palestinians that made these settlements possible is reduced to Israeli effort, immigrant endurance, and national construction. Palestinian villages, Arabic place-memory, and the violence of removal remain outside Tamar's field of narration (see Shohat, *Israeli Cinema* 253, 276). This absence matters because the novel's nation-building scenes

depend on it. The landscape can appear available only after Palestinian history has been removed from the story. The novel thus performs, at the level of narration, the disavowal that Sabbagh-Khoury locates in the archives of the kibbutzim themselves, and that Rashid Khalidi's history places within a hundred years' war of settler colonialism and Palestinian resistance.

Upon arrival in Israel, Tamar and Meir discover that the promised return is experienced as humiliation. The state that claimed to retrieve them treats Moroccan Jews as backward, Arabized, and in need of discipline. The immigrants immediately confront the demand to abandon Moroccan language, customs, and memory:

> Everyone started shouting and yelling simultaneously. . . . We were betrayed. We were lied to for years. We thought we were coming to the land of milk and honey. . . . What were we thinking? We should've never come to this forsaken place. We should've known. Did Daniel know? Did he too lie to others shamelessly? All the people we'd entrusted our lives with thought of us as stupid, unworthy people. "I want to go back to Morocco, please," Meir said. . . . "You're very lucky to be here. Morocco is over with, and you'd better get used to it. It's no longer your future, just the past. . . . Israel is in a state of creation. . . . Your lives there were in danger. Didn't you notice the changes? Do you know how much power radical Islamic groups are gaining. . . . Israel is a melting pot. We're all Israelis now, not Moroccans anymore. You need to abandon the Arab ways, that culture, the symbols, and the foreign traditions you brought with you. . . . The faster you assimilate, learn Hebrew, and abandon the Moroccan ways, the easier your absorption will be." (Armbrister 165)

This passage condenses the novel's critique of coercive integration into Israeli national culture. The immigrants are told that "Morocco is over" and that their future depends on abandoning Arab ways. Tamar and Meir are required to disown the cultural forms that made their Jewishness Moroccan. The language of the "melting pot" becomes coercive because it demands the suppression of Maghrebi identity as the price of Israeli belonging.

In Israel, Tamar gradually becomes more critical of the state's propaganda and of its discrimination against Sephardic Jews, especially Moroccan Jews. Moroccan Jews are sent to development towns, moshavs, and border zones, while Ashkenazi Jews occupy more established cities such as Tel Aviv. Before they reach the settlement, they are placed under the authority of Israeli officials who speak to them as dependents to be managed: "climb in the back and sit tight next to each other. There are two rows of benches. This supports ten people on each side. Children don't count, they should sit on your laps. Keep your legs tucked in as we need to fit your luggage in the middle. It's not going to be comfortable, but at least this truck has benches. Some people have to stand all the way" (Armbrister 153). The passage reverses the promise of national redemption. The immigrants who have just been welcomed with prayer and flags are handled as transportable excess. Children "don't count," and bodies must fold themselves around luggage. The placement of Moroccan Jews in development towns and state-planned border spaces marks their subordinate position within the Israeli state. Tamar later understands that this ostracism is part of a policy that separates "modern" European Jews from supposedly backward North African Jews:

> Rumors traveled that in many other areas, the Moroccan Jews, or the Sephardic weren't treated well, but I didn't feel it as much. Maybe because I spoke French, maybe because my ways seemed less "barbaric" in the eyes of the Eastern European Jews, or maybe because Meir was educated. But in truth, only a fraction of the Moroccans I even met came from the large cities of Morocco as we did. Once again, I realized how

> exceptional my life in Morocco had been. I was privileged to earn a French education, socialize with the upper class, and have the option for higher positions and liberal professions. . . . It was easier to dump us in Moshavs, developing towns, or the outskirts of the country. For Meir and me, learning to speak and read in Hebrew was crucial. Meir wanted to assimilate as fast as possible, to adopt the ways of the senior residents of Israel and those who called themselves Sabra—the native-born Israelis. . . . Meir and I wanted to be part of the contribution to better our life, we wanted to prosper, as opposed to being perceived as second class citizens. (Armbrister 172-73)

Tamar's French education and urban background temporarily protect her from the full force of anti-Moroccan prejudice, yet they also expose the internal class distinctions among Moroccan Jews and show how colonial French hierarchies traveled with her into Israel. At the same time, the Israeli state's decision to "dump" Moroccan Jews in moshavs, development towns, and border spaces confirms that the promised return to the Jewish homeland is organized through spatial segregation. Hebrew, Sabra identity, and assimilation become conditions of survival, while Moroccan identity is rendered an obstacle to citizenship.

The dehumanization becomes explicit when the immigrants are sprayed with "white powder" upon arrival. Tamar reacts with humiliation, asking, "What are we, cockroaches?" The Israeli employee's answer is callous: "You'll meet a lot of cockroaches . . . Don't get too sensitive. You're in Israel now" (Armbrister 152). The scene condenses the violence of state-managed relocation. The immigrants are treated as bodies to be disinfected before they are treated as citizens, in a colonial sanitation ritual that handles racialized subjects as carriers of infestation. The state that promised redemption first receives Tamar as a contaminated body. Orit Bashkin documents a parallel trajectory among Iraqi Jews, whose reception in the transit camps combined disinfection, spatial sorting, and cultural condescension.

The discrimination faced by Moroccan Jews in Israel confirms Shohat's account of the Zionist denial of Arab Jewishness. Shohat argues that official Israeli ideology urges Sephardim and Mizrahim to see their "only real identity as Jewish," while Arabness is treated as a "Diasporic stain" to be cleansed through assimilation ("Invention" 5-6). Armbrister dramatizes this process through housing, language, and social hierarchy. European Jewish immigrants are placed in cities such as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, while Jews from Muslim lands are sent to the margins because "the government didn't want the less modernized people to inhabit the largest cities" (Armbrister 172). Tamar and Meir learn Hebrew and attempt to adopt the ways of the Sabra, but their Moroccan background marks them as inferior. Their Sephardic identity is treated as too close to Arabness, and therefore as a problem to be managed.

The Ben Zakens therefore occupy an ambiguous position, caught between Zionist promises and Israeli discrimination. Tamar grows increasingly aware of the state's racism and of the reduction of Arab Jews to laborers cultivating the land, yet she never fully renounces the state; her criticism remains contained within a larger Zionist attachment. She both exposes the violence of state policy and participates in the narrative that legitimizes Jewish settlement in Palestine, becoming the mouthpiece through which Armbrister reclaims a distant Moroccan Jewish heritage while affirming Zionist claims over the land.

Tamar resists de-Maghrebization by insisting that Morocco remains part of her identity. Before leaving, she and Meir explicitly reject the idea that Zionism can take Morocco from them: "'We are Moroccans. . . .' 'I don't want to go to Israel,' I said. 'Morocco is my country.' Meir's eyes cleared. He seemed to awaken from a dream. 'We are Moroccans,' he said. 'No one will ever take that away from us'" (Armbrister 131). This declaration is not nostalgia in its simplest form. It is a refusal to accept the Zionist recoding of Morocco as exile. O'Hanlon's

account of subaltern historiography is useful here because she describes the rewriting of history from the perspective of "the dispossessed of that periphery," whose "subjectivity, experience and agency" must be restored to history (190). Tamar's insistence on Moroccan identity gives narrative form to that restoration. In Israel, that insistence takes communal shape:

> I missed everything; real couscous, the smells of the streets, Arabic music, the souk, the language, the people—home! I cried until I could cry no more. . . . we all dwelled on Morocco in one way or another. The past was already remembered nostalgically, better than it was. . . . Its residents [of Uza city] were more observant than we were and most of them originated from Libya. We didn't speak the same language; still, we shared a similar flavor for food and culture. They too originated from an Arab country, and a wonderful friendship evolved. . . . Adults and kids alike hang outside, chatting, playing cards, smoking cigarettes, laughing, crying, dwelling on our beloved Morocco. (Armbrister 171-73)

The passage shows that Moroccan longing in Israel is communal rather than private. The catalogue of losses runs from couscous and street smells to Arabic music before ending in the single word home, and the friendship with the Libyan Jews of Uza indicates that this nostalgia builds a shared Arab Jewish sociality on the margins of the state.

By the end of the novel, Tamar is a grandmother and is depicted as a woman formed by two worlds. Her husband never fully recovers from Morocco. On his sickbed, he says that "the world is disappearing and coming to its end," as if the world he knew has collapsed beyond repair. Tamar, by contrast, has been remade by Israel without fully losing Morocco. She has internalized the language of Israeli belonging and sees Palestine as the promised land that she helped build. She becomes the "New Jew," the Zionist ideological figure imagined as Hebrew-speaking, rooted in Israel, productive, strong, and freed from the supposed weakness and humiliation of diaspora. Shohat explains that classical Zionist discourse constructed the "New Jew" against the "exilic" Jew, whose "fear, weakness, and humiliation came to be despised" (*Israeli Cinema* 37). Tamar's final declaration fits this model: "No one in Morocco left to ask. The chapter of the Moroccan Jews was closed. We are now a flip in the pages of history. We are Israelis now" (Armbrister 216).

Yet the same final scene unsettles this declaration. Even as Tamar announces that the Moroccan Jewish chapter is closed, she is "sipping from my Nana tea," enjoying the summer in a habit carried from Morocco, a habit that "hasn't changed" (Armbrister 216). This detail prevents the ending from becoming a complete Zionist closure. The Moroccan Jewish past survives in domestic practice, tea, memory, and the habits of the body. This domestic persistence resembles the gendered archive identified in Chochana Boukhobza's *For the Love of the Father*, where food, family stories, and women's everyday practices preserve Judeo-Maghrebi continuity after physical return has become inaccessible (Belahrache and Barhoun, "Diaspora and Belonging" 12–13). In this sense, *One Moroccan Woman* both participates in and exposes the coercive process through which Moroccan Jews were made Israeli. It celebrates Israel as home while showing the humiliation, racialization, and cultural loss through which Moroccan Jews relinquish their Maghrebi world, exposing the cost of Zionist erasure while repeatedly returning to the national frame. Through Aziza, Tamar, Meir, and the Moroccan Jewish immigrants in Israel, Armbrister reconstructs Sephardic identity as a layered formation shaped by Jewish ritual, Muslim proximity, Moroccan belonging, French colonial pressure, and Zionist dispression. Its central contradiction is precise. Moroccan Jewish identity cannot be understood if Arabness and Jewishness are treated as opposites, yet the novel constantly submits

that identity to the very Zionist structure it also exposes. Tamar's memory of Morocco keeps that discrepancies open.

## Conclusion

*One Moroccan Woman* is strongest when read through its unresolved political ambivalence. It recovers a Moroccan Jewish world of Muslim mothers, Arabic sounds, domestic care, food, mourning, and female solidarity, yet it also participates in the Zionist grammar that removes Palestine from view. It is a narrative in which Moroccan Jewish injury and Palestinian silencing are produced within the same settler frame.

Read through Shohat and Harrison, the novel demonstrates that de-indigenization and Palestinian dispossession are not parallel stories but one process observed from two positions. The rupture that tears Tamar from Aziza is prepared by the same discourse that later hands Meir a gun on the perimeter of Kiryat Gat. What Zionist recruitment dismantles in Marrakesh, the settlement absorbs beside ruins it will not name. In this respect the analysis extends Semi's account of counter-narrative and Sabbagh-Khoury's account of disavowal toward a single literary case, showing how one text can perform both at once. Tamar remembers against the melting pot and forgets on behalf of the state, sometimes within a single page.

The concept of settler countermemory names this doubleness and gives it analytical use beyond the present case. It invites scholars of Mizrahi and Sephardic writing to ask not only what minority memory recovers but where that memory settles, and it invites scholars of Palestine to attend to the racialized Jewish migrants through whom settlement was partly carried out and who paid for it in their own cultural effacement. Novels by Bensimhon, Carlibach, and other Maghrebi-Israeli writers await similar readings, as do the community memoirs that Moreno and Bitton examine. A comparative study across these corpora could test whether the structural tension traced here belongs to the genre rather than to one text, and whether women's narratives, organized around foster mothers, kitchens, and mourning rooms, carry the ambivalence differently than the masculine national plots they quietly unsettle.

The stakes are not merely literary. As long as Moroccan Jewish memory is celebrated in Israel as folklore while its Arabness is treated as a stain, and as long as Palestinian history remains unspeakable within that celebration, the wound Armbrister's novel both exposes and conceals stays open. Tamar's nana tea, sipped in a town built over erased villages, is a small and stubborn archive. Reading it honestly requires holding her loss and the loss she was made to overlook in the same hand.

## Works Cited

Armbrister, Yamit. *One Moroccan Woman: Inspired by True Events*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014.

Barhoun, Brahim. Review of *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World*, by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay. *Confluence: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2026, pp. 150–53.

Bashkin, Orit. *Impossible Exodus: Iraqi Jews in Israel*. Stanford UP, 2017.

Belahrache, Chaimae, and Brahim Barhoun. "A Sephardic Female Odyssey: Homecoming in Ruth Knafo Setton's *The Road to Fez*." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2025, pp. 74–93.

---. "Diaspora and Belonging: Re-Inventing Tunisian Jewish Life in Chochana Boukhobza's *For the Love of the Father*." *Jewish Culture and History*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2026, pp. 36–50.

Boum, Aomar. "From 'Little Jerusalems' to the Promised Land: Zionism, Moroccan Nationalism, and Rural Jewish Emigration." *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2010, pp. 51-69.

---. *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco*. Stanford UP, 2013.

Daniele, Giulia. "Mizrahi Jews and the Zionist Settler Colonial Context: Between Inclusion and Struggle." *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2020, pp. 461-80.

Gottreich, Emily Benichou. *Jewish Morocco: A History from Pre-Islamic to Postcolonial Times*. I.B. Tauris, 2020.

Harrison, Olivia C. "Rethinking 'Jews' and 'Arabs' through Palestine: Transcolonial Perspectives on Maghrebi Literature." *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2013, pp. 17-27.

---. *Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in the Era of Decolonization*. Stanford UP, 2015.

Hayoun, Massoud. *When We Were Arabs: A Jewish Family's Forgotten History*. The New Press, 2019.

Hochberg, Gil Z. *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination*. Princeton UP, 2007.

Khalidi, Rashid. *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*. Metropolitan Books, 2020.

Levin, Sarah Frances. *Narrative Remembrance: Close Encounters between Muslims and Jews in Morocco's Atlas Mountains*. 2017. U of California, Berkeley, PhD dissertation.

Levy, Lital. *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine*. Princeton UP, 2014.

Memmi, Albert. "The Arab and Jew." *The Albert Memmi Reader*, edited by Jonathan Judaken and Michael Lejman, U of Nebraska P, 2011, pp. 245-54.

Miccoli, Dario. *A Sephardi Sea: Jewish Memories across the Modern Mediterranean*. Indiana UP, 2022.

Moreno, Aviad, and Haim Bitton. "The Moroccan 'Yizkor Book': Holocaust Memory, Intra-Jewish Marginalization, and Communal Empowerment in Israel." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2023, pp. 261-83.

O'Hanlon, Rosalind. "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1988, pp. 189-224.

Roumani, Judith. "'Le Juif Espagnol': The Idea of Sepharad among Colonial and Postcolonial Francophone Jewish Writers." *Sephardism: Spanish Jewish History and the Modern Literary Imagination*, edited by Yael Halevi-Wise, Stanford UP, 2012, pp. 213-34.

Sabbagh-Khoury, Areej. "Memory for Forgetfulness: Conceptualizing a Memory Practice of Settler Colonial Disavowal." *Theory and Society*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2023, pp. 263-92.

Semi, Emanuela Trevisan. "Double Trauma and Manifold Narratives: Jews' and Muslims' Representations of the Departure of Moroccan Jews in the 1950s and 1960s." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2010, pp. 107-25.

---. "Lifewriting between Israel, the Diaspora and Morocco: Revisiting the Homeland through Locations and Objects of Identity." *Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature: A Diaspora*, edited by Dario Miccoli, Routledge, 2017, pp. 84-97.

Shenhav, Yehouda. *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*. Stanford UP, 2006.

Shohat, Ella. "The Invention of the Mizrahim." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1999, pp. 5-20.
---. *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*. U of Texas P, 1989.
---. "Rupture and Return: Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab Jews." *Social Text*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2003, pp. 49-74.
---. "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims." *Social Text*, nos. 19/20, 1988, pp. 1-35.
---. *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*. Duke UP, 2006.
Siegel, Irene. "A Judeo-Arab-Muslim Continuum: Edmond Amran El Maleh's Poetics of Fragments." *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 1, 2017, pp. 16-32.
Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2006, pp. 387-409.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Moral Authority and Communal Ethics in Moroccan Folktales

**Mohamed Rouichi**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.9552

**Mohamed Rouichi** is an Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature. He holds a Ph.D. in English Literary and Cultural Studies from Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco. His research focuses on Moroccan storytelling traditions, with particular emphasis on gender, religion, and power dynamics. His work examines cultural narratives as sites of memory, identity formation, and social negotiation, exploring how oral traditions articulate ethical values and reflect evolving structures of authority and social relations.

mohamedrouichii1994@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5502-7070

Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 17-02-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Moral Authority and Communal Ethics in Moroccan Folktales

**Mohamed Rouichi**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

## ABSTRACT

This article examines how Moroccan folktales articulate moral responsibility, compassion, political authority, and family unity through symbolic and narrative structures embedded in Moroccan oral tradition. Although Moroccan storytelling has been widely documented, its tales still require analysis through an interdisciplinary lens that integrates anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic, and gender-attuned approaches. Drawing on these foundations, this study argues that Moroccan oral narratives operate simultaneously as cultural texts, psychological expressions, and ethical teachings. Through a close reading of three tales—"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," "The Vizier and the Chicken," and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"—the article demonstrates how these stories negotiate tensions between spiritual aspiration and filial duty, reveal expectations of just kingship and political conduct, and highlight compassion and familial bonds as central components of moral life. By attending to symbols, character archetypes, and cultural context, the analysis shows that Moroccan folktales function as tools for exploring the nature of virtue, authority, and social cohesion. Ultimately, the study contributes to folklore scholarship by illustrating how Moroccan tales encode complex moral and psychological insights that remain deeply resonant within contemporary cultural consciousness.

## KEYWORDS

**Moroccan Folktales**

**Moral Values**

**Family Dynamics**

**Political Power**

**Religion**

## Introduction

Across Morocco's diverse oral traditions, storytelling has long served as a vehicle for transmitting ethical values, social expectations, and models of spiritual conduct. These narratives have not only been shared in homes but also performed in *el halqa*, "the most overtly theatrical among artistic spaces in traditional marketplaces and fairs, as well as in other public spheres such as the gates of ancient medinas" (Amine and Carlson 32). Such tales convey a moral vision shaped by Islamic beliefs, Amazigh and Arab cultural memories, and communal experiences. Oral tales are ubiquitous in every corner of the world, and, according to Papailia, "possess a rich potential for philosophical reflection" (187). Beyond their aesthetic appeal, they also perform important social functions, allowing communities to express shared values, collective memories, and cultural anxieties (Thompson and Wojcik 144). In Moroccan orality, folktales consistently foreground themes of compassion, filial piety, moral responsibility, and legitimate political authority. They not only entertain but also articulate the emotional and ethical codes through which communities understand family relations, social order, and divine justice. Yet despite the richness of Moroccan orality, the moral and symbolic structures of tales

Contact ✉ mohamedrouichii1994@gmail.com
©2026

still require further scholarly attention. This article responds to that gap by offering a close reading of three Moroccan stories—"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," "The Vizier and the Chicken," and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"—to illuminate how they convey moral lessons, compassion, political authority, and family unity within their cultural-historical contexts.

Interpretation of folktales has long been grounded in anthropological theories. William Bascom's influential essay "Folklore and Anthropology" situates folklore "squarely within the fourth field, cultural anthropology," arguing that it expresses the "customs, traditions, and institutions of living peoples" (283). Bascom's formulation underscores that tales are inseparable from the communities that produce and transmit them. Alan Dundes similarly challenges in "The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture" the disciplinary division between literary and anthropological approaches, noting that the traditional dichotomy between treating folklore as literature and treating it as culture is ultimately "unnecessary" because "studying folklore in literature and studying folklore in culture is almost exactly the same" (136). Dundes critiques earlier folklore scholarship for fixating on the identification of tale-types and motifs at the expense of cultural meaning, describing such text-centered work as a "sterile study of folklore for folklore's sake" (136).

This shift in folklore studies parallels sociological approaches that emphasize the social nature of "the folk." As Roger D. Abrahams notes in "Towards a Sociological Theory of Folklore," the concept of "folk" is inherently sociological, referring to groups defined by shared values and practices (161). Folktales emerge from and respond to these shared systems. J. L. Fischer's "The Sociopsychological Analysis of Folktales" likewise argues that tales persist over generations only if they are "both psychologically and socially adjustive" (258). From this perspective, folktales function simultaneously as social stabilizers and psychological expressions. Fischer proposes studying four interrelated systems—the tale itself, the teller, the audience, and the cultural environment—asserting that symbolic and social meaning can be derived only by examining how these elements interact (247-73).

Psychoanalytic theories also inform contemporary readings of narrative. Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) established the possibility of decoding symbolic meanings embedded in stories, while Jungian scholarship developed this approach by situating folktales within the collective unconscious. Marie-Louise von Franz, in *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (2017), argues that tales express universal psychic patterns involving the shadow, anima, and animus, as well as parental archetypes, and she outlines a rigorous method of interpreting symbols through amplification, comparison, and contextual analysis (10, 40–46). Dundes, in "Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics," emphasizes that folklore carries significance for both tellers and listeners and warns that scholarship has often "dehumanize(d) folklore" by reducing it to structural classification while overlooking its communicative function (1500). Psychoanalytic approaches thus provide a useful lens for understanding the emotional, symbolic, and moral resonance of Moroccan tales, especially those centered on mothers, saints, rulers, and acts of justice.

Another important dimension of folklore interpretation arises from feminist scholarship. Alexander F. Chamberlain, drawing on O. T. Mason's discussion of "Woman's Share in Primitive Culture," highlights women's foundational role in early religion, poetry, and cultural expression, emphasizing their importance as creators and custodians of oral traditions (Chamberlain 205). Early collections such as Lady Wilde's *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* (1887) and Thiselton-Dyer's *Folk-Lore of Women* (1905) illustrate a longstanding interest in women's roles within storytelling cultures. Feminist folklorists later emphasized how women's experiences, voices, and symbolic representations had been neglected in scholarly discourse, seeking, as Kousaleos notes, to illuminate the ways female experience had been "ignored, denied, and devalued in the production of knowledge" (20). In

the Moroccan context—where women storytellers play a central role and mother–child relationships dominate moral discourse—gender-attuned approaches shed light on the emotional and ethical depth of tales such as "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit."

Despite these rich theoretical traditions, a specific research gap persists in the study of Moroccan folktales. Existing scholarship has made invaluable contributions to the documentation, preservation, and performance analysis of Moroccan oral traditions. Works such as Richard Hamilton's *The Last Storytellers*, Harry Stroomer's collections of Amazigh folktales, and Aicha Rahmouni's studies of storytelling in northern Morocco have preserved important narrative materials and illuminated their cultural contexts. Likewise, scholars such as Khalid Amine have explored the performative dimensions of Moroccan storytelling traditions. Yet relatively little attention has been devoted to interdisciplinary analyses that combine anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic, and gender-sensitive approaches in the interpretation of specific tales. As a result, the symbolic, psychological, and ethical dimensions of Moroccan narratives remain insufficiently examined.

The present study focuses on three tales that foreground distinct yet interconnected dimensions of Moroccan moral discourse. "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit" explores spirituality, kinship, gender, and moral responsibility; "The Vizier and the Chicken" examines political accountability and just governance; and "The Tale of Hatim Tai" centers on generosity, self-sacrifice, and ethical leadership. Together, these narratives provide a representative corpus through which familial, religious, and political values may be examined within Moroccan oral tradition. While all three tales contribute to the article's exploration of moral authority and communal ethics, greater analytical attention is devoted to "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit." Its combination of religious symbolism, family dynamics, gender relations, and psychological themes makes it especially suitable for an interdisciplinary reading that draws simultaneously on anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic, and gender-sensitive approaches. This article addresses that gap by applying an integrated interpretive framework to stories concerned with moral responsibility, political authority, compassion, and family unity. In addition to textual analysis, the article occasionally draws upon limited autoethnographic observation to illustrate the continuing relevance of beliefs and practices referenced in the tales.

## "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit": Sainthood, Power, and Maternal Devotion

### Synopsis of the Tale

"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," narrated by Moulay Mohamed el Jabri and published by Richard Hamilton in *The Last Storytellers*, centers on a devout young man named Jores who withdraws from the bustle of Marrakech and journeys to the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. Leaving behind his aging mother, he chooses a cave as his retreat, where he immerses himself in prayer and the study of religious texts. Gradually, word of his piety spreads, and people from near and far flock to him seeking advice, healing, and miracles. Even the sultan of Marrakech hears of his extraordinary powers. Summoned to the royal palace, Jores insists that his abilities are not magic but manifestations of God's power working through him. To test the authenticity of this claim, the sultan orders him to create a stream of water; with unwavering faith, Jores taps his staff on the ground, and water springs forth. Convinced of Jores' connection to the divine, the sultan grants his request to build a mosque atop a mountain, where he

continues his spiritual life. Once the mosque is completed, Jores settles there in seclusion. Meanwhile, his mother, longing to see him, undertakes the difficult journey up the mountain. She knocks repeatedly at the mosque door, but Jores, absorbed in prayer and study, does not hear her. Feeling abandoned, she returns to Marrakech in sorrow. Unaware of her visit, Jores remains devoted to his religious pursuits, unintentionally neglecting the mother whose love and sacrifices had sustained him. The narrative then introduces Rabia, a young woman who falls in love with Jores. After he rejects her advances, she becomes involved with a shepherd and later becomes pregnant. Fearing the consequences of her situation, she falsely accuses Jores of dishonoring her. He is imprisoned and sentenced to death. Before his execution, Jores asks to see his mother, who comes immediately, convinced of his innocence. At the decisive moment, a miraculous voice from Rabia's womb reveals that the shepherd is the true father of the child, thereby vindicating Jores. The tale concludes with Jores's moral and spiritual rehabilitation and his renewed commitment to family life and filial responsibility.

## Type and Structure of the Tale

The tale is reminiscent of "The Three Green Twigs," collected by the Brothers Grimm and classified as ATU 753. In that story, a hermit lives at the foot of a mountain, spending his days in prayer. He carries water up the mountain as an offering to God, accompanied by an angel who counts his steps and brings him food. One day, seeing a criminal being led to the gallows, he remarks that the man is simply "getting his deserts!" (691). That evening, the angel fails to appear, and the hermit realizes he has offended God by presuming to judge another. After his prayer for forgiveness, a bird tells him that only God may judge human beings. The angel eventually returns and hands him a dry branch, instructing him to wander the world until it sprouts three green twigs, begging for food and never staying two nights in the same house. After many hardships, he finds shelter in a cave with an old woman who fears her criminal sons. He narrates the story of his penance to her and later to the sons, who are so moved by his humility that they renounce their wicked ways. The tale concludes with the hermit's death and God's acceptance of his penance: "Thus the Lord had once more received him into his favour" (693).

In structural terms, Jores's spiritual journey forms the exposition; the rising action consists of his growing reputation for miraculous powers; the climax comes with the sultan's challenge and his divinely assisted success; the falling action includes his imprisonment, miraculous vindication, and reconciliation with his mother, culminating in the establishment of a new family. Binary oppositions animate the narrative: Jores's solitude in the cave versus his interaction with the needy; his closeness to God versus his emotional distance from his mother; his imprisonment versus his final redemption. These contrasts heighten the emotional intensity and thematic resonance of the oral story. Through structural analysis, the roles and functions of the characters become clearer: Jores embodies the archetype of the spiritual seeker; his mother represents the neglected caregiver; the sultan functions as the worldly authority who acknowledges divine power; Rabia appears as both a figure of temptation and an instrument through which moral and spiritual truths are ultimately revealed. Repetition—especially the unheeded knocking at the mosque door—underscores the longing for connection and the devastating consequences of missed opportunities, while variation in the plot highlights character development and narrative complexity.

## Analysis of the Tale

"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit" foregrounds the profundity of maternal bonds. The tale opens with a familiar motif in Moroccan storytelling: the main character embarks on a quest, leaving the feminine figure alone in her abode. Here, however, it is the son who abandons his aging mother. His journey is not heroic in a martial or economic sense, but explicitly spiritual: he renounces the tumult of Marrakech "to find a quiet place to purify his soul" (70). Jores represents the hero archetype who ventures into isolation to seek spiritual solace, faces trials, and attains wisdom. The Atlas Mountains, described as "like a finger pointing up to God" (71), symbolize elevation, transcendence, and proximity to the divine. This image resonates with enduring Moroccan practices of spiritual retreat, where devout men withdraw from cities to seek refuge from worldly distractions. In such retreats, they engage in fervent prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and preaching, forging intimate communion with Allah and with one another.

The tale also invites psychoanalytic interpretation. From a Freudian perspective, Jores's withdrawal from society may be understood as a retreat from the complexities of ordinary social life into a spiritually idealized realm. Freud was often skeptical of religious experience, regarding it as a form of wish fulfillment that helps individuals cope with anxiety and uncertainty. Jores's quest for purity and transcendence can thus be read as an attempt to escape worldly obligations, including his responsibilities toward his aging mother. Jung, however, offers a different interpretation. Rather than viewing spirituality primarily as illusion, Jung understood religious symbols and experiences as potentially meaningful stages in the process of individuation. From this perspective, Jores's journey initially represents an incomplete form of development. Although he cultivates spiritual discipline, he neglects familial and social obligations. Only after enduring false accusation, imprisonment, and public humiliation does he begin to integrate these neglected dimensions of life. His eventual transformation into a devoted son, husband, and father suggests a movement toward psychological wholeness rather than mere ascetic withdrawal.

Jores's extraordinary powers attract visitors seeking guidance and healing: "If a blind man came, he would find his sight restored; if Jores touched a sick man, he became healthy; and if a cripple visited the cave he would discover, to his astonishment, that he could walk again" (70). These miraculous deeds align him with the archetype of the sage-healer who possesses supernatural knowledge and the ability to cure afflictions. The sultan's summons further underscores the interplay between folk narrative and religious belief. Jores attributes his powers entirely to God: "I'm working with God. Only Allah can do these things; I simply use his powers" (71). In Morocco, the belief that healing originates in divine power rather than human magic remains deeply ingrained in many regions. As a limited autoethnographic observation, I encountered similar beliefs firsthand while seeking treatment for a sciatica-related condition. For instance, Mohammad of Tamazouzte is reputed to cure sciatica through foot cupping. Patients often testify that they were once unable to walk comfortably but gradually recovered after several sessions. As he works, Mohammad lectures on religion and piety, constantly insisting that only God heals and that true faith is a prerequisite for recovery. Significantly, he has no fixed fee, allowing patients to pay what they can—or nothing at all. Similarly, many flock to Sheikh Mohammed Larbi Samadi, a young religious figure from Zaouia Samadia Mchichia in Tangier, seeking baraka and spiritual healing, often considering him a descendant of the Prophet (Morocco World News).

Jung's concept of the persona is also a useful tool for understanding Jores's development. As his reputation grows, he becomes increasingly identified with the social roles of saint, healer, and miracle worker. The persona, drawing on Jung's insights, is the mask through which individuals meet the expectations of society. Jores's public identity as a holy man gradually overshadows other aspects of his life, particularly his obligations as a son. The tale, therefore, exposes the danger of identifying too completely with a socially admired role. Although revered by strangers, Jores fails to recognize the emotional needs of the person who sacrifices most for him. His later suffering functions as a corrective that dismantles this one-sided identification and compels him to integrate spiritual devotion with ethical responsibility.

Against this backdrop, Jores appears as a paradigmatic man of piety whose healing abilities are understood as a direct consequence of his devotion. The quintessential figure of divine healing in religious tradition is Jesus, who, by God's permission, healed the blind and leprous and raised the dead, as mentioned in Surah Āl 'Imrān 49 and Surah al-Mā'idah 110. Similarly, in the Qur'an, Pharaoh accuses Moses of sorcery and summons magicians to challenge him, but they eventually recognize Moses as God's true messenger. Through divine providence, Moses performs miracles that authenticate his prophetic mission and compel people to acknowledge it. Jores's ability to summon water echoes these prophetic miracles; it serves as a sign of divine favor awarded for his unwavering devotion. Water here symbolizes divine intervention, prosperity, growth, and collective well-being. The spring Jores produces may be read as a metaphor for spiritual nourishment flowing into the Moroccan community; its emergence suggests that adherence to religious guidance yields abundance and blessing.

The narrative takes a critical turn when the sultan recognizes and honors Jores' connection to the divine. By building a mosque for him, the sultan acknowledges both the saint's spiritual authority and the centrality of religious institutions in Moroccan society. The mosque functions as a sanctuary and as a communal hub where believers gather, worship, and seek solace. It stands as a physical representation of shared faith and communal unity. Yet, this episode also illuminates the intricate relationship between political and religious power. Susan Gilson Miller and Rahma Bourqia's *In the Shadow of the Sultan: Culture, Power, and Politics in Morocco* (1999) traces how Moroccan political authority has historically intertwined with culture, religion, and social structures, emphasizing the monarchy's remarkable continuity since the ninth century and the cultural practices that have sustained its legitimacy (1–4). They argue that political legitimacy in Morocco was consistently anchored in religious doctrine and the consolidation of spiritual authority. The Almoravids grounded their rule in Maliki Sunnism and Abbasid endorsement, while the Almohads broke with earlier models by claiming a radically unitarian caliphate. The Marinids later combined Maliki Sunnism with Idrisid Sharifism, reinforcing legitimacy through the construction of Sunni madrasas, and the Sa'dis expanded these strategies by forging powerful Sufi alliances and cultivating the Sharifian cult to secure widespread public support. Throughout these dynastic transitions, jihad—whether directed inward or outward—functioned as a recurring symbol of divine mandate, reinforcing the ruler's sacred authority. While earlier dynasties depended on strict doctrinal claims, later powers such as the Sa'dis adopted more flexible and pragmatic approaches to legitimacy, demonstrating how Moroccan rulers continuously adapted religious and political strategies to maintain cohesion within a fragmented society (17–26).

Within this historical context, Jores can be understood as a saintly figure. Mohamed El Mansour notes that "the core of popular piety becomes the saint as a charismatic figure. The saint is venerated for what he is and what he does in terms of miracles" (13). Leo Africanus, cited by Westermarck, similarly emphasizes that a person may become a saint through extraordinary piety: incessant prayer, diligent fasting, abundant charity, and strict avoidance of forbidden acts (Westermarck 44). Westermarck also observes that retreating to a sacred

mountain is a common path to sanctity—he cites Jbel Lakhdar in Dukkala, renowned for its hermits (45). Jores' retreat to the Atlas Mountains thus conforms to a recognizable model of sanctity.

El Mansour further stresses that the saint's power, derived from God, is incommensurate with the ruler's worldly authority (20). Saints could intervene in political matters, especially to protect people from unjust taxation or conscription. Even after death, their tombs became sites of intercession. In late-nineteenth-century Fez, for instance, Mawlay Idris was invoked to oppose oppressive fiscal policies. Through baraka, saints could challenge abuse: rulers who imposed unjust taxes might suffer inexplicable illnesses understood as divine retribution (20–21). Within this framework, the sultan's treatment of Jores becomes especially significant. By honoring him and building a mosque, the sultan avoids antagonizing a potentially powerful spiritual figure whose baraka could destabilize his rule. The tale thus subtly reveals the negotiation between spiritual charisma and political authority in Morocco.

Yet the narrative's most salient moral precept lies less in politics than in the interplay between filial ties and maternal devotion. The proverb *ربيتو كيف لكليب, عطيت نخالة أو دكيك أو ملي كبر هرنن فيا* / *"I raised him as a pup, with bran and flour provided, yet when he grew, at me he yelled"* encapsulates the bitter truth that a mother may lavish care on her son only to face abandonment once he attains adulthood. The tale mirrors this proverb, dramatizing the heartbreak of a mother who, having sacrificed everything, finds herself turned away—literally unheard—at her son's door. Another proverb, *ما حلا عيطت مي كيف لعسل في فمي* / *Calling 'my mother' is as sweet as honey in my mouth,* emphasizes the sweetness and comfort associated with maternal presence. Together, these sayings reflect the cultural conviction that the mother–son relationship is central to Moroccan family dynamics.

This moral emphasis is echoed in other Moroccan narratives. Harry Stroomer's "A Story about a Man and his Mother" tells of a man who attempts to repay his mother for past suffering. Convinced that children owe their parents, he devotes a decade to serving her. Even carrying her on his back during the pilgrimage to Mecca is declared insufficient to repay the immeasurable depth of her sacrifice. The story concludes with her forgiveness and his continued journey, reinforcing the idea that maternal love can never truly be repaid. Similarly, "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit" insists on the unpayable nature of a mother's devotion and the gravity of failing to honor it. Jores "was so wrapped up in his prayers and scholarship that he completely forgot about his poor old mother" (71). This forgetfulness is deeply paradoxical: outwardly, he is the model of devoutness; inwardly, he violates one of Islam's fundamental ethical obligations—kindness and care toward parents, especially in their old age.

As Khalid Amine observes, "storytelling becomes Shahrzād's means of survival" (72). Similarly, female figures in folktales often rely on intelligence, rhetoric, and strategic cunning to negotiate power within restrictive social contexts. Although women are frequently confined to marginal roles in Moroccan folktales, certain narratives depict them as cunning figures who can manipulate events and challenge established social hierarchies (Rouichi 70). In this tale, Rabia's entrance further complicates the moral landscape. As an alluring feminine figure, she attempts to seduce Jores, who resists her advances through extreme self-discipline:

> He took a deep breath, went back into the room, where he lit a fire, and then placed his hands in the flames until the skin was scalded. "How this little fire burns," Jores thought. "I better not do anything with this girl, for if I do, I shall surely burn in hell." So deciding that he should resist the temptations of the flesh, Jores, whose hands were still burning, leant out of the window of the minaret again and told Rabia that she must leave immediately. (73)

This scene clearly evokes the Qur'anic narrative of Prophet Youssef (Joseph) and Zuleikha. Both Jores and Youssef resist illicit desire; both are subsequently victims of false accusation. In Youssef's case, his rejection of Zuleikha's advances leads to imprisonment and prolonged suffering; yet his unwavering faith in divine justice eventually results in vindication. In many Islamic renditions, Youssef's innocence is confirmed through a sign—a torn shirt read as proof, or in some narrative traditions, the speech of a child.

What might reasonably complicate Rabia's role in the narrative is a gender-sensitive reading. Firstly, she appears primarily as a temptress and false accuser whose actions threaten the devout man. Yet such a reading risks overlooking the social pressures surrounding female sexuality in the Moroccan community. An unmarried pregnancy could expose a woman and her family to severe shame, social exclusion, and reputational damage. From this perspective, Rabia's accusation against Jores may be understood not simply as an act of malice but also as a desperate attempt to navigate a social order that offers women limited avenues for survival once their honor has been publicly compromised. While the tale ultimately condemns her deception, a feminist interpretation reveals the structural constraints that shape her actions. Rabia thus emerges not merely as a plot device but as a figure whose predicament reflects broader anxieties surrounding gender, sexuality, and social respectability.

Jores successfully resists temptation but is unable to defend himself against Rabia's false charge. When condemned, he utters the plea, "My last wish is to see my mother" (74). Here the proverb ما حلا عيطت مي كيف لعسل في فمي gains concrete narrative form: calling on one's mother becomes both a spiritual and emotional refuge. Other proverbs—لي عندو مو لا ترفد همو/ *Do not worry about he who has his mother*, and زيزون ما يفهمو غير مو/ *A mute can only be understood by his mother*—emphasize that a mother is the supreme guardian and interpreter of her child.

This maternal devotion appears in many Moroccan tales, including Elisa Chimenti's "Mother, Mother…" in *Tales and Legends of Morocco* (1965). In that story, a jealous wife gradually expels her mother-in-law from the household and ultimately demands her liver as a cure to save her own unborn child. Under emotional pressure, the son kills his mother and brings home her liver, only to hear it speak tenderly to him when he stumbles: "Are you hurt, my child?" The liver, in Moroccan oral tradition, symbolizes instinctive, visceral love—much as "the apple of one's eye" in English.

In Jores' tale, he remains largely passive and silent throughout his ordeal; he neither argues nor justifies himself. His muteness can be read as a sign of internalized helplessness, a psychological paralysis in the face of communal judgment. It is only the presence of his mother—her unwavering belief in his innocence—that restores balance and leads to his vindication. When the sultan places his finger on Rabia's stomach and calls upon the unborn child to speak, the miracle of embryonic testimony recalls not only extra-Qur'anic elaborations of Youssef's story but also the Qur'anic description of Jesus speaking as an infant in Surah Maryam 29. The use of miraculous speech as a narrative device—whether the speaking baby of Youssef's tradition, the infant Jesus in Maryam, or the voice from Rabia's womb—serves to externalize divine justice. For believers, such miracles confirm God's ultimate control over truth and falsehood. At the same time, the tale subtly interrogates reliance on miracle as a resolution: how often in real social life is such vindication experienced? The narrative's skeptical undercurrent becomes a way of exploring faith in divine justice amid human injustice.

Psychologically, Jores' story dramatizes the tension between outward religiosity and inner moral integration. At first, Jores' identity is anchored almost exclusively in ritual practice and seclusion; prayer and scholarship give him a sense of certainty and superiority. Yet the experience of injustice—false accusation, imprisonment, and public humiliation—forces him to confront his vulnerability and to re-evaluate the nature of true piety. Through this ordeal, it becomes clear that spiritual maturity requires not only vertical devotion to God but also

horizontal responsibility toward parents and community. His mother's unwavering support functions as the emotional and ethical core of the tale. Surrounded by doubters, she alone refuses to believe the accusation, embodying the deeply rooted psychological need for familial love, validation, and protection. Her presence enables Jores' eventual transformation from an isolated holy man into an integrated figure who is, at once, a devoted worshipper, husband, father, and son. The final line—"He became a good husband, father and son, since he remembered how his mother had saved him, and he looked after her too" (76)—confirms that the story's resolution lies not only in his acquittal but in his reorientation toward his mother.

Moroccan proverbs further underscore this conclusion. The saying *إذا مات لبو توسد ركبا وإذا ماتت لوم توسد لعتبا / If the father dies, make your knee your pillow; if the mother dies, make the doorstep your pillow* conveys the idea that a mother is the ultimate shelter, whose loss leaves one exposed to the world. The proverb *لوم دجاجة او لبو عجاجة / The mother is a chicken and the father is a dust storm* symbolically contrasts maternal stability and care with paternal unpredictability; the hen broods her chicks beneath her wings, protecting them, while the father, referred to as the dust storm, is directionless and potentially destructive.

The moral message of "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," like many other narratives, is thus deliberately ambiguous yet profoundly suggestive. Jores emerges victorious, but only after rethinking both his religious outlook and his social obligations. The tale insists that true piety cannot be reduced to ritual practice or ascetic withdrawal. Rather, it must include care for one's parents and responsiveness to human relationships. A parallel moral appears in another of Chimenti's tales, "Abdullah the Highwayman." In this tale, Abdullah, a brigand in the Atlas Mountains, vows to kill a hundred people in revenge but is moved by a pilgrim's plight and eventually repents. In stark contrast, a saintly scholar who has spent a lifetime in religious practice is condemned to hell for deceitfully disguising his wealth from a needy pilgrim. God declares to the latter:

> "I am not unjust to those who serve me," He [God] said. […] "You are well learned in the ways of religion and yet you did not hesitate to pretend to the pilgrim that you had no other bread than black bread and no other grapes than those of inferior quality. Your place is with the demons in Hell." For the justice of Allah has no parallel. (140)

Abdullah is granted entry to paradise because of his repentance, whereas the pious scholar, despite a life of religious observance, is punished for ethical failure. The message is clear: piety without sincerity and compassion is incomplete. In exactly the same way, Jores learns that solemn prayer and asceticism alone are insufficient. True religiosity lies in the devotion of the heart—embodied in his renewed relationship with his mother and his assumption of familial responsibility. "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit" therefore operates on multiple levels: as a story of miracles and sainthood; as a subtle commentary on the relationship between saintly and royal power; as a powerful affirmation of maternal love; and as a psychological narrative of spiritual growth. It suggests that the highest form of worship is not mere withdrawal from the world, but the ability to harmonize one's spiritual aspirations with compassionate care for those who have given one life—first and foremost, one's mother.

## Moral Authority in "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"

Moroccan narratives also imagine what a ruler should be, how he should act, and how power should be exercised. Just as oral tales insist on fairness, responsibility, and compassion within the household, they project the same expectations onto the figure of the king or sultan. The ruler, like a parent, is supposed to care for and guide his people with wisdom and restraint. When this care is absent, social order collapses—whether within a family or within a kingdom. The connection between household and state is not accidental; it reflects a shared symbolic logic in which power is understood through everyday relational structures such as parent–child or husband–wife. As the tales suggest, moral authority is what holds family and community together. A just ruler bears the responsibility of preserving social order, preventing chaos, and confronting challenges with both equity and firmness.

Two tales especially illuminate these expectations: "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai." Both explore the ethical obligations of political rule and the standards by which rulers are judged. Many Moroccan narratives convey lessons about just kingship, often presenting righteous sovereigns who strive to govern with fairness and integrity. At the same time, other tales warn against tyranny and depict divine punishment inflicted on rulers who abuse power. In this sense, "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai" can be read as complementary reflections on justice, generosity, and leadership in the Moroccan storytelling tradition.

### Synopsis of "The Vizier and the Chicken"

"The Vizier and the Chicken," narrated by Ahmed Temiich and published by Hamilton, is set in Marrakech under the rule of a fundamentally good sultan. Although he is well-intentioned, his court is populated by sycophantic viziers who constantly flatter him and present an unrealistically positive image of his reign. Suspicious that he is not being told the truth, the sultan decides to disguise himself as a beggar and orders his grand vizier to do the same. In this humble disguise, they can move through the city anonymously, observing directly how people live. This moment of dissembling constitutes a turning point in the tale: it allows the sultan to see the stark poverty of his subjects and exposes the lies and self-interest of the viziers who had painted an image of prosperity and contentment.

As they wander, they encounter a merchant named Mohamed. When asked how he is, Mohamed responds cryptically, "The tree is falling." When asked if he can pluck the feathers from a chicken, he replies that he can—"if you hold it steady." The sultan, baffled by these images, commands his grand vizier to explain their meaning within three days or lose his position. The vizier then negotiates with Mohamed, eventually paying him twenty gold coins for the interpretation. Mohamed clarifies that "the tree" symbolizes his own mind and body, weakened and declining with age, while "the chicken" represents the vizier himself, whose "feathers" (his wealth) have been plucked by Mohamed in exchange for the explanation. When the sultan learns how the vizier has been tricked, he recognizes both the merchant's cleverness and the vizier's incompetence. Dissatisfied with his courtiers' inability to perceive reality—and their willingness to exploit their positions—he dismisses them and resolves to surround himself with honest advisers who will put the welfare of the people above flattery and self-interest.

## Variations of the Tale

Moroccan oral tradition contains many such narratives of wise rulers whose concern for justice drives them to investigate the true condition of their subjects. A notable figure in the broader Arabic and Islamic narrative world is the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, who appears in numerous tales in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Aicha Rahmouni, for instance, presents three stories featuring the fifth Abbasid caliph: "Haroun ar-Rashid and His Three Viziers," "Harun ar-Rashid and the Swindlers," and "Harun ar-Rashid and the Three Thieves." In these narratives, Harun al-Rashid repeatedly disguises himself in order to walk among his people and test whether his decrees are being obeyed, a motif that underscores themes of justice, surveillance, and accountability.

In "Haroun ar-Rashid and His Three Viziers," the caliph issues a decree banning nighttime wandering. When he himself ventures out at night in disguise, he is caught, beaten, and exiled under his own law. He finds refuge in a house where three men share fantastic tales: one has been turned into a dog by a woman, another serves invisible beings in a magical realm, and a third regains lost wealth with the help of a ring and clever animals. Harun's experience shows how authority can be undermined by its own mechanisms and how anonymity can both protect and expose the ruler. In "Harun ar-Rashid and the Swindlers" (also published as "The King and the Kofta-Seller" in Harry Stroomer's *An Anthology of Tashelhiyt Berber Folktales* (2001)), the sultan and his vizier are captured by a butcher who sells human flesh. The vizier sacrifices himself for his master, but the sultan devises a plan for escape: he proposes sewing beautiful items that the captor can sell at high prices. Thanks to this craft, the sultan is freed and reflects that "If a handicraft does not make one rich, [it] sustains [him], and perhaps saves life" (253). In "Harun ar-Rashid and the Three Thieves," the king again ventures out at night in disguise, joins three thieves, and ultimately brings them to justice. Across these narratives, the ruler's disguise highlights the tension between his formal position and his moral responsibility to know and address the reality of his people's lives.

Other Moroccan stories also stage encounters between rulers and divine justice. In "The Sultan and the Gazelle," published in *Tales and Legends of Morocco*, a Moroccan sultan dreams of an angel who tells him to travel east to meet the Prophet and receive Allah's Law. At the end of the tale, he recognizes the Prophet through an act of mercy and humbly asks for guidance on the path to salvation. The ruler's legitimacy is thus tied to his ability to recognize divine compassion and submit to God's law.

Tahir Shah, in *In Arabian Nights* (2008), describes hearing "The Tale of Hatim Tai" from a Moroccan storyteller named Fouad (229). The story portrays Hatim Tai as a beloved and extraordinarily generous king of Arabia. Under his rule, the kingdom thrives, and tales of his kindness circulate widely. Jaleel, a neighboring king, becomes envious of Hatim's fame and threatens to invade unless Hatim submits to him. To save his people from bloodshed, Hatim voluntarily relinquishes his throne and goes into exile as a dervish in the mountains. Jaleel takes control of the kingdom and offers a large ransom to anyone who can capture Hatim. Despite hardship, Hatim lives in obscurity and remains cherished by his former subjects. One day, he overhears an old man and his wife speaking affectionately of him and lamenting Jaleel's tyranny. Revealing himself to them, Hatim insists they hand him over to claim the reward. They are arrested alongside him and brought before Jaleel. In keeping with his character, Hatim's first concern is for the poor couple; he urges the tyrant to reward them. Moved by Hatim's generosity, Jaleel releases him, restores his throne, and promises to protect him thereafter. Hatim's self-sacrifice and magnanimity exemplify an ideal of kingship grounded in concern for the people rather than personal power.

These stories—"The Vizier and the Chicken," the Harun al-Rashid narratives, "The Sultan and the Gazelle," and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"—are linked by a shared vision of what political leaders should embody. The recurring motif is that of a ruler animated by a strong sense of justice and an earnest commitment to his subjects' welfare. They portray the complex interplay between authoritarian power and moral responsibility in Moroccan and broader Islamic imaginaries. While the sultan or king possesses formidable political authority, his legitimacy is ultimately measured by his ability to restore order, avoid oppression, and align his rule with divine justice.

## Analysis of "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"

Classical Islamic political thought provides a conceptual framework for this moral vision. In *Kitab al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyya* (1996), al-Māwardī discusses the qualities of *al-imām al-ʿādil*, the just ruler. He emphasizes justice over injustice, the capacity for informed legal reasoning (*ijtihād*), and the physical abilities—sight, hearing, speech—necessary for effective leadership (19–20). The just ruler must be nimble in decision-making, lead with wisdom for the benefit of the community, and exhibit both courage and compassion in defending the community and confronting enemies. These traits ensure not only his success in governance but also the protection of the people's well-being.

Ibn Khaldūn's *Al-Muqaddima* (1377), a foundational work in sociology, cultural history, demography, theology, and political theory, provides a further lens. Ibn Khaldūn argues that humans are naturally social and require political authority to prevent chaos, conflict, and bloodshed. The king's role is to safeguard stability through protecting borders, collecting revenues, and organizing military campaigns. His authority must be comprehensive; if he cannot defend his territory or maintain fiscal and social order, his rule is incomplete (360). A crucial concept in Ibn Khaldūn's analysis is that of *al-raʿiyya*, the entrusted subjects. The value of the ruler, he argues, does not rest on his appearance or individual talents such as intelligence or calligraphy, but on how he manages the affairs of his people. If he is kind and attentive, the state benefits and remains stable; if he is harsh and unjust, he breeds moral corruption and destabilizes the polity (362).

Seen in this light, "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai" center on the sultan's characterization as a conscientious ruler who honors the ethical demands of his position. In the first tale, the sultan corrects his own distance from his people by disguising himself and ultimately purging his court of sycophants. In the second, Hatim Tai willingly sacrifices his throne for the sake of his subjects' safety. Both embody moral accountability, even when their choices run counter to self-interest.

Historical exempla reinforce these ideals. Umar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, often regarded as a unique model of *Amīr al-Muʾminīn* (Commander of the Faithful), is celebrated for his extraordinary sense of justice and concern for the poor. In *ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz wa Siyāsatuhu fī Radd al-Maẓālim* (1987), it is noted that the caliph distanced himself from the entangling influence of his social circle, even giving his wife the choice of staying with him under his austere conditions or returning to her parents' home (112–117). He dismissed his personal bodyguards, decisively distinguishing his rule from prevailing Umayyad practices. He also removed a number of obsequious political figures from power, echoing the sultan's dismissal of sycophantic viziers in "The Vizier and the Chicken." ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz dismantled many Umayyad political habits and revived the simplicity of the first four caliphs—Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, and ʿAlī—who chose to live as poor men (111–17). Biographical accounts stress that he feared being held responsible for every hungry person in his domain. These historical and hagiographical narratives feed into Moroccan storytelling, which presents

the true ruler as one who resembles the early caliphs in modesty, justice, and concern for the vulnerable.

To understand psychologically why so many tales present the sultan in disguise, one may turn to Carl Jung's notion of the persona. In Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, Jung explains that the "persona"—originally the mask worn by actors—signifies the social face an individual presents to the world (157). It creates the impression of individuality, but is shaped by collective expectations and roles. For Jung, the persona is a vital component of the psyche, alongside the ego, the shadow, and the collective unconscious. It is a "compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be" (157).

In both "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai," the sultans are men of power concerned about their people. Yet in the first, the sultan is surrounded by courtiers who maintain their positions by offering only flattery and withholding uncomfortable truths, whereas Hatim Tai voluntarily abandons his throne to protect his subjects from war. In Jungian terms, the persona corresponds to the official role—the king as seen on the throne, surrounded by ceremony, titles, and institutions. The sycophantic viziers cling to their personas; they maintain a façade that aligns with the sultan's preferred image rather than the actual condition of his kingdom. Over time, the sultan begins to doubt the authenticity of their praise and decides to step outside his persona by disguising himself as a beggar and walking the streets of Marrakech. Hatim Tai, similarly, strips away his royal persona by dressing as a peasant and living as a dervish in order to spare his people.

Jung remarks that when we analyze the persona, "we strip off the mask, and discover that what seemed to be individual is at bottom collective" (157). The persona is "a semblance, a two-dimensional reality" (157). In the tale of the sultan of Marrakech, the act of disguise symbolizes his willingness to remove his mask and confront the underlying reality of his kingdom. Without his royal garments, guards, and entourage, he is able to see the conditions of his subjects as they truly are. At the same time, his viziers' personas—built on deception and flattery—are revealed as empty performances.

Jung adds that even when a person is highly identified with their persona, the unconscious self "is always present and makes itself felt indirectly if not directly" (158–59). When the persona cracks or is shed, a period of psychic disequilibrium may occur, allowing previously repressed truths to emerge. The sultan's journey into the city's poor quarters, where "some people slept out in the streets in nothing but rags," shocks him into awareness; he "realized that all was not well in Marrakech and vowed to help his people in the future" (109). This realization represents the integration of previously suppressed collective truths into his conscious governance.

In "The Vizier and the Chicken," the encounter with Mohamed crystallizes this process. Mohamed's statement that "the tree is falling" symbolically refers to his own declining health, the inevitable decay of the body. His metaphor of plucking the feathers of a chicken alludes to his ability to strip the vizier of his wealth in exchange for knowledge. The vizier's failure to discern the meaning of these metaphors reveals his inability to see beyond surfaces—beyond the persona—to deeper symbolic truths. The sultan's anger—"Then why are you my Grand Vizier, if you cannot explain what this man says?" (109)—exposes the uselessness of advisers who refuse or are unable to confront uncomfortable realities. Recognizing Mohamed's insight and the vizier's cowardice, the sultan dismisses not only the grand vizier but all obsequious members of his court. This act signals his decision to surround himself with truthful counsellors, thus reshaping his political environment to align with moral responsibility.

Moroccan tales not only promote the image of a just ruler; they also vividly warn against tyranny. "The Vengeance of Allah," another tale published by Richard Hamilton, describes a

cruel leader named Rashid who orders his horsemen to annihilate a Berber tribe. Two children, Abdul and Malika, survive and hide under a laurel tree, where they encounter a forest spirit that grants them a magical stick that produces food when tapped on the ground. With the help of supernatural beings, they rescue their imprisoned mother. Soon after, a catastrophic natural disaster destroys Rashid's town and palace. He ultimately repents and dies, but the narrative's title foregrounds divine retribution. The tale dramatizes the principle that rulers who misuse power to oppress the innocent invite God's punishment. Qur'anic verses reinforce this warning: Surah al-Ḥijr 92–93 suggests that all, including kings and sultans, will be judged for their actions, while Surah al-Ḥadīd 57 reminds believers that wealth belongs to Allah and must be spent rightly.

Taken together, these narratives suggest a coherent moral philosophy of governance within Moroccan storytelling. The just ruler is one who actively seeks the truth about his people's conditions, removes corrupt or sycophantic advisers, accepts personal sacrifice to protect his subjects, and aligns his rule with divine justice. Tyrannical rulers who exploit their power face severe consequences, whether through rebellion, supernatural punishment, or divine judgment. Moroccan oral tales thus serve not only as entertainment but as a continuous ethical commentary on political leadership, insisting that true sovereignty is inseparable from moral accountability.

## Conclusion

In her book *We Need New Stories* (2019), Nesrine Malik argues that both individuals and societies rely on narratives to create meaning and social order, since stories provide frameworks through which communities understand their values and collective experience (6). Moroccan folktales are far more than imaginative narratives or remnants of a fading oral tradition; they function as repositories of cultural ethics, psychological insight, and social philosophy. Through a combination of anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic, and gender-sensitive perspectives, this article has shown that Moroccan storytelling sustains a moral discourse that unites familial responsibility, political justice, and communal well-being. The tales examined—"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," "The Vizier and the Chicken," and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"—demonstrate how moral authority operates simultaneously within the household and the state, reflecting shared expectations concerning both personal conduct and public leadership.

Beyond the interpretation of individual tales, the interdisciplinary framework employed in this study reveals dimensions of meaning that would remain less visible through a single disciplinary lens. Anthropological approaches illuminate the cultural values and collective memories embedded in oral narratives; sociological perspectives reveal their role in reinforcing social norms and communal cohesion; psychoanalytic readings uncover symbolic tensions surrounding spirituality, authority, and family relations; and gender-sensitive analysis highlights the ways stories negotiate questions of female agency, vulnerability, and social constraint. Considered together, these approaches demonstrate that Moroccan folktales operate simultaneously as ethical instruction, psychological expression, social commentary, and cultural memory.

It is important to note that the findings also point toward promising directions for future research. Further studies might examine Amazigh storytelling traditions through similar interdisciplinary methods, compare Moroccan folktales with related narratives from elsewhere in the Maghreb, or investigate the role of women storytellers in the preservation and transmission of oral culture. Such inquiries would deepen our understanding of Moroccan folklore not merely as a repository of traditional narratives but as a dynamic site of ethical

reflection, social negotiation, and cultural creativity. By continuing to transmit stories that celebrate compassion, justice, responsibility, and communal solidarity, Moroccan oral tradition remains a vital source of cultural meaning in the contemporary world.

## Works Cited


Abrahams, Roger D. "Towards a Sociological Theory of Folklore: Performing Services." *Western Folklore*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1978, pp. 161–80.

Amine, Khalid, and Marvin Carlson. *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia: Performance Traditions of the Maghreb.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Amine, Khalid. "The Reinvention of Storytelling Tradition in Moroccan Theater: From Postcolonial Hybridity to Women's Empowerment." *Theater in the Middle East: Between Performance and Politics*, edited by Babak Rahimi, Anthem Press, 2020, pp. 71–86.

Al-Māwardī, Abū al-Ḥasan. *Kitab al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyya.* Dār al-Fikr, 1996.

*Al-Qurʾān al-Karīm.* Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 2019.

Bascom, William R. "Folklore and Anthropology." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 66, no. 262, 1953, pp. 283–90.

Bourqia, Rahma, and Susan Gilson Miller, editors. *In the Shadow of the Sultan: Culture, Power, and Politics in Morocco.* Harvard University Press, 1999.

Chamberlain, Alexander F. "Primitive Woman as Poet." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 16, no. 63, 1903, pp. 205–221.

Chimenti, Élisa. *Tales and Legends of Morocco.* I. Obolensky, 1965.

Dundes, Alan. "The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 78, no. 308, 1965, pp. 136–42.

---. "Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics." *MLN*, vol. 91, no. 6, 1976, pp. 1500–1533.

El Mansour, Mohamed. *The Power of Islam in Morocco: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives.* Routledge, 2021.

Fischer, J. L. "The Sociopsychological Analysis of Folktales." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1963, pp. 235–95.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams.* 1899. Books on Demand, 2016.

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales.* Knopf Doubleday, 2011.

Hamilton, Richard. *The Last Storytellers: Tales from the Heart of Morocco.* I.B. Tauris, 2011. Reprinted 2012.

Ibn Khaldūn. *Al-Muqaddima.* Dār al-Kitab al-ʿArabī, 2008.

Jordan, Rosan A., and F. A. de Caro. "Women and the Study of Folklore." *Signs*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1986, pp. 500–18.

Kousaleos, Nica Serena. "Feminist Theory and Folklore." *Folklore Forum*, vol. 30, no. 1/2, 1999, pp. 19–34.

Jung, C. G. *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology.* Taylor & Francis, 2014.

Malik, Nesrine. *We Need New Stories: Challenging the Toxic Myths Behind Our Age of Discontent*. Orion Books, 2019.

Morocco World News. "Truth About Young Moroccan Sufi Who 'Heals the Sick, Performs Miracles.'" *Morocco World News*, 14 Apr. 2015,

https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/04/119440/truth-young-moroccan-sufi-heals-sick-perform-miracles/.

Papailia, Artemis. "The Philosophical Potential of Folk Tales for Children: An Exploration of 'Who is the Smartest?' from Karditsa, Greece." *The Philosophical Power of Fairy Tales from Around the World: An Ocean of Stories*. Edited by Wendy C. Turgeon, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, pp. 183–199.

Rahmouni, Aicha. *Storytelling in Chefchaouen, Northern Morocco: An Annotated Study of Oral Performance with Transliterations and Translations.* Brill, 2015.

Rouichi, Mohamed. "Female Kayd in Moroccan Storytelling: 'The Woman and the Devil.'" *Confluence: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2026, pp. 61-75.

Ṣallabi, Ali Muḥammad. *Umar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz: Maʿālim al-Tajdīd wa al-Iṣlāḥ al-Rāshidī ʿalā Minhāj al-Nubuwwa.* Dar al-Tawziʿ wa al-Nashr al-Islamiyya, 2006.

Shah, Tahir. *In Arabian Nights: A Caravan of Moroccan Dreams.* Bantam Books, 2008.

Stroomer, Harry. *An Anthology of Tashelhiyt Berber Folktales (South Morocco).* Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2001.

Thompson, Tok, and Daniel Wojcik. *Exploring Anthropology through Folklore and Mythology*. Routledge, 2025.

Thiselton-Dyer, T. F. *The Folk-lore of Women.* A. Constable & Co., 1905.

Von Franz, Marie-Louise. *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales.* Revised ed., Shambhala, 2017. Originally published 1970.

Westermarck, Edward. *Ritual and Belief in Morocco.* Macmillan, 1926.

Wilde, Lady. *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland.* Ward and Downey, 1887.

Zakaria, Magda Faisal. *ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz wa Siyāsatuhu fī Radd al-Maẓālim.* Maktabat al-Ṭālib al-Jāmiʿī, 1987.

Vermeer, Hans J. "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action." Translated by Andrew Chesterman, *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, Routledge, 2000, pp. 221–232.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Same *Shit*, Different Toilets: Terror, Outrage and the Cycle of Power in Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu*

**James Aboi Dominic and John Kwasu Katung**
Faculty of Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.8957

**James Aboi Dominic** is a Nigerian writer, essayist, cultural critic, visual artist, and editor. He holds degrees from universities in Zaria, Nigeria, and Cambridge. His scholarly and creative interests include creative writing, literary theory, African and African American literature, and contemporary literature that explores peace and conflict resolution, history, visual art, and the environment. He currently teaches in the Department of English and Literary Studies at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

dominicjamesaboi@gmail.com

**John Kwasu Katung** is an educator, researcher, and certified teacher trainer pursuing a PhD in English and Literary Studies at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His research examines the re-narration of experience in diaspora women's writing, with a particular focus on identity, memory, and literary representation. A British Council Master Trainer, he has led professional development programs for teachers, digital education initiatives, and creative writing workshops across diverse educational settings. His professional experience includes educational research, monitoring and evaluation, curriculum development, and program design, with collaborations involving organizations such as the British Council, UNICEF, GIZ, CREID, and the Mastercard Foundation.

kkatung@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7019-9703

Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 15-02-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Same Shit, Different Toilets: Terror, Outrage and the Cycle of Power in Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu*

**James Aboi Dominic and John Kwasu Katung**
Faculty of Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

## ABSTRACT

Post-Independence Nigeria has been mired in problems of power consolidation, the challenge of leadership and its capacity to handle myriad sociopolitical issues. Critics have written on sociocultural aspects of Soyinka's works as well as the military interventionist traits in his plays, but this paper is concerned with the transition of power from one regime to another. Wole Soyinka in *King Baabu* deploys biting sarcasm etched on the remarkable background of contemporary history to portray the bastardization of leadership positions by military despots-turned-politicians. Using the praxis of New Historicism, the paper interrogates the playwright's outrage and disenchantment at the power structure and at leaders who have bullied the masses while masking their true intentions behind promises of democratic dividends. The paper concludes that this seizure of power through unscrupulous means to keep their corrupt practices in motion culminates in a case of the same "shit," different toilets: same people, same ideology, except for a different system taking advantage of the masses whose gullibility spurs its continuity.

## KEYWORDS

**Post-Independence**

**Soyinka**

**Nigeria**

**Sarcasm**

**Power**

**New Historicism**

**Military Dictatorship**

## Introduction

The old adage of visualizing life as a vicious cycle is best exemplified by the leadership of post-independence Nigeria, particularly after the coup of January 15, 1966. This marks the beginning of military interventionism in civilian leadership and governance. Nationalist and anti-colonial pressures exerted on the British colonialists enthroned a Nigerian representative government in October 1960, though it was not earned. Unlike the guerrilla warfare of the Maji Maji of Tanzania (Schmidt 27-62), the Gukurahundi militarized violence against the people (Mangena 7; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems 961), the Second Chimurenga liberation war against Ian Smith in Zimbabwe and the Chilembwe revolt in Nyasaland (Malawi) (Barchiesi 360); the Mau Mau guerrilla warfare (Barnett and Njama 23), the Sepoy Mutiny or the Indian Insurrection (Belmekki 113-24; Pati; Baker 511-43; Malik 95-127) among others fought by subjects materially and culturally disoriented by colonial conquests after World War I to earn their Independence through sacrificial bloodbaths, the Nigerian Independence came at a lesser cost. Probably, that is why its leadership takes the privileges of power for granted. It is unfortunate that the abuse and imbalance of representation of power obliged the military to disrupt the course of history, which has altogether caused the country eighteen years of military dictatorship and nine coups d'état. Not to mention military heads of state masquerading as democratically elected presidents beginning from 1999, when the country had a political interlude from the interesting transformation of General Sani Abacha and his mysterious death.

Contact ✉ dominicjamesaboi@gmail.com ✉ kkatung@gmail.com

©2026

This death and attempts by the military junta to revitalize and reinstate their power positions under the auspices of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) form the basis of this paper. It is fascinating that even when civilian rule was reinstated, it was punctuated by the overwhelming presence of the military. Having ousted the Maradona of Nigerian politics, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, the Sani Abacha regime (1993-1998), knowing the cycle could be reversed, switched its uniforms for civilian attire to contest for public office.

The scatological representation of leadership and control in the anecdotes by Soyinka and Maiwada metaphorically embodies power and its inherent qualities. The post-Independence tussle for power has become so commonplace that it serves as a vernacular atmosphere in the country in the sense that, regardless of religion, age, creed or social stratifications, everyone is obsessed and absorbed in the process of acquiring it. This is why Maiwada warns that though shit, which is power in this case, is "something sweet, tasty, until it went into us," before it is abused by selfish means and ends, "out the anus it still hasn't exhausted its utility": meaning shit – power – could be harnessed towards positive or negative dispositions. It is not surprising that Soyinka's character Sagoe fashions his "Shit Philosophy" as Voidancy and avers that "voidancy is not a movement of protest, but it protests, it is non-revolutionary, but it revolts" (*The Interpreters* 71), and concludes that "To shit is human, to voidante divine" (156). In this way, to hold onto power is human, but to explore its truth and positive energies is divine. Esty takes an ethical leaning on voidancy: "even when understood according to the representational codes of realism, however, shit has a political vocation: it draws attention to the failures of development, to the unkept promises not only of colonial modernizing regimes but of postindependence economic policy" (32).

The deployment of shit both as a tyrannical force of negativity and as a symbol of resistance is explored to demonstrate its terror, the people's outrage, its cyclical nature of existence and continuity. This slice of Nigerian military history has found expression in the sociocultural and political satire, *King Baabu* by Wole Soyinka, which is roughly presented as a paratext, in the manner of the French playwright Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi*. The play is concerned with power and its cyclical nature within the political landscape of Nigeria. It weaves burlesque, comedy and storytelling techniques to draw attention to germane issues affecting society.

Jarry's (1873-1907) play is a parody of *Macbeth* in which a revolutionary (Ubu) kills the king of Poland (Piepenbring); it has *merdre* as its first line, a neologism which is the French word for *shit* with an extra *r* added (Moorcock). The play brutally attacks complacency, mocks civilization and sweeps humanity into a slop-pail. Using Jarry's play as a "retro," which, according to Stuart Sim, is the "appropriation and recontextualization of older forms and styles" (D'Angelo 35) and a mode of intertextuality, Soyinka interrogates the complexities of dictatorships and expresses his disenchantment with the masses who accommodate the empty manifestos of the military power brokers, despots-turned-politicians, as we see in the transformation of Basha Bash to a life President, and finally to a monarchical messiah to ensure and confer the inheritance of power on his heir apparent, Biibabae. Soyinka demystifies the myth of sympathizing with the masses as victims of an immoral system by depicting their contributions to their undoing. As in the Yoruba worldview, where morality is bound up with mandatory compensation of nature, Maduakor contends that Soyinka's notion of morality is "predicated on the dialectics of challenge and response, on action and counteraction, on the hubristic infractions of nature, which in turn, compel countermeasures for the reassertion of totality" (301). Jeyifo is right in stating that Soyinka's works seem to promote a kind of "bourgeois" radicalism in representing the lower social orders in ways that did not show a belief in their readiness or capacity to overthrow the conditions of their oppression (xiv). Talajooy lends weight to this claim in asserting that Soyinka's *King Baabu* suggests a recurrent pattern

of human inanity that results in similar vicious systems, such that not even God could save the masses from their fooleries (387).

## Brief Outlines on the New Historicism and Soyinka's *King Baabu*

The New Historicism is an innovative critical movement sometimes called cultural poetics that emerged in the 1980s from the writings of Stephen Greenblatt, like *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Belsey 43-44), and is supposed to replace old criticism in a manner that supersedes prominent positions of the 1970s, notably Deconstruction and Marxism (Hohendahl 87). It is premised on the "importance of historical context to the interpretation of text of all kinds" (Hamilton 2), and also investigates a veneration of the past or traditions with a view to the contingent dynamics of human actions (Pieters 23-24). In understanding the dynamic flexibility of New Historicism and its ability to incorporate other forms, McGann opines that in a historicist's imagination, "history is the past, or perhaps the past seen in and through the present; and the historical task is to attempt a reconstruction of the past, including, perhaps, the present of that past…" (105). Of the binary between past and present, Bressler posits that "an intricate connection exists between an aesthetic object – a text or any work of art – and that all texts must be analyzed in their cultural context, not in isolation" (188). In a similar vein, Greenblatt lends weight to this, saying "belief and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained" (11).

Brannigan asserts that New Historicism is a mode of critical interpretation that privileges power relations as the most important context for texts of all kinds (6). He further asserts that as "a critical practice it treats literary texts as a space where power relations are made visible." Ryan, in his introduction to *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*, observes that new historicists insist on "situating the text, on sticking it back into the intertextual quilt of its initial contest," and finally submits that "The aim is to dethrone and demystify the privileged literary work: to destroy its immunity to infection by circumstance and other kinds of text, and to rob it of political innocence by exposing its discreet commitments, its subtle collusions in the cultural struggle for power" (xiii-xiv). This is to say the trajectory in a text, most times, is to subvert an earlier notion, which, in a political way, addresses an earlier ideal that is not agreed upon, and therefore proffers another way of seeing or a different (better) view, if necessary. It is only right that some of the key assumptions and tenets of New Historicism be discussed in the body of the work as this study progresses.

The two-act play, *King Baabu,* illustrates a contemporary view of resisting "official narratives that rationalize oppressive necro-politics and consign terror to the past" (Youker 550) and therefore begins with a military takeover. Maariya, Basha's wife, celebrates her husband's participation in the coup and the spoils it brings. She takes advantage of the turbulent situation by staging a house arrest, which results in Basha taking over as the new Head of State. Basha and his wife bribe their way to acceptance and adopt the British model of monarchy to enthrone him as king of the Guatu kingdom. At the end, Potipoo plans a comeback that results in Basha's poisoning through a rhino's powder, which is supposed to be an aphrodisiac. This, like the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* brings the Marabout's prophecy to bear (Al-Moghales and Hezam 1549), and demonstrates how oppressive regimes switch sides to suit their priorities at the expense of the masses left worse than the previous government.

## The Anal-Orgy in the Cycle of Power and the "Shitstem"

The self-evident notion that absolute power corrupts absolutely or *deliciously* continues to manifest itself not only in Africa but also in Nigeria after Independence. Instead of the leadership harnessing the resources of the country, escaping external pressures and molding an independent identity (Booth 6) by steering the country towards infrastructural and sustainable development, it was busy creating personality cults and making sure it stayed in power. This irresponsible thirst for power and material wealth at the expense of a suffering population gave the military the impetus to take over, with the claim of restoring good leadership to the country. The military involvement further disintegrates meaningful transitions of power as one coup follows another. Soyinka, who is outraged by the recycling of parochial governments, lampoons the miscarriage of leadership responsibilities in his political satire. Maiwada (19), in like manner, laments this roller-coaster, disillusioned state of the nation when he posits:

> I hear a report from the barracks
> His sheep of state is bleating…
> ……
> "There is a coup in process –
> "Cabbage out, garbage in"
> I can see the sweat making fissures
> In their starch emasculated khaki
> And blood flowing on the bridge
> Of the earth's surface (19)

This crass desire for control has launched the country into an orgy of power-drunkenness engaged by military despots who demand the lion's share of national wealth from the shitstem. Maariya basks in the euphoria of acquiring filthy wealth, saying, "To be rich is to be rich, whether deserved or not is nobody's business" (5). New Historicists are "not as interested in power plays between contending monarchs or between monarchs and usurpers as they are interested in the operations of power within regulating ideologies" (Brannigan 7). This is why it is symbolic to consider Maariya's approval of Basha's participation in the coup as General Set-em up and Knock-em down, and asking him not to settle for less. Basha, on his part, decries being poor and celebrates wearing the deceased General's long service medallions (5). Indifferent to the rationality of purpose, the military continues to use the people as "correction fluids for their regal errors" such that a religious plea has to be summoned: "where will our salvation come" (Maiwada 19).

The orgy of power acquisition stimulates a narcissistic enchantment with the tropes (ropes) of its manipulation and the struggle to maintain it. The incompetence of leaders and their stooges is represented by the wasteful projects and failed promises they engage in. Basha aspires to designate millions of dollars for a special budget allocation to begin Operation Fill the Stomach (17), which ironically satirizes the military government of Olusegun Obasanjo, who introduced the Green Revolution, dubbed Operation Feed the Nation in 1973. In a similar vein, Basha encourages Potipoo to secure luxuries for the future instead of retiring on "chicken feed army pension?" (17). This Darwinian survival of the fittest in the post-independence jungle of African politics and its consequence, as it was in Nigeria, is captured by p'Bitek (107) thus:

> Some said
> Independence falls like a bull buffalo

> And the hunters
> Rush to it with drawn knives,
> Sharp shining knives
> For carving the carcass.
> And if your chest
> Is small, bony and weak
> They push you off,
> And if your knife is blunt
> You get the dung on your elbow,
> You come home empty-handed
> And the dogs bark at you! (107)

Power works without permission like an anal urge to a purging stomach. It disables responsibility and accountability of any kind. General Rajinda was killed for failed budgetary allocation (20), and his next in command, Potipoo, refuses to declare his assets. Rent and Dope – as well as Rout, who represent labor, tradition and religious interests – insist on having something to tell their followers, else they lose their positions, but Maariya bribes them to silence in the most convincing oratorical plea: "the ancestors must not be denied libation and sacrifices" (28). This choice of moments in the presentation of history is how New Historicism relates a very small section of actual life, only that section which is connected with public or institutional or cultural change (Kroner 134). In spite of critics' disagreement with Louis Montrose's "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history," New Historicism establishes connections among discrete texts at levels of discourses (Holub 175) and in the context of this paper, it mediates history as an ongoing text being written across various facets of lives of commoners and aristocrats tugging through Nigeria's history as illustrated by Soyinka.

Soyinka's *King Baabu* deploys Shakespearean allusions in a manner that brings history into conversation with the present. This "transposition of one sign system into another" (Kristeva 60), one of the key tenets in New Historicism, is best exemplified when Basha's wife fools him into passing a forged intelligence report to his superior. He justifies his apology thus: "I say to Potipoo, look, I love my wife, but I love my Commander-in-Chief more." This resonates with Brutus' claim after his involvement in the murder of Caesar: "If that a friend asks why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer: Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more" (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* 52). This shows every text is in a dialogical relationship with others; no text can be completely free from other texts, and in this case, Soyinka parodies *Julius Caesar* to ridicule abused power positions. In the manner Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth encourages Macbeth to usurp power from King Duncan (*Macbeth* 41), Maariya schemes towards gaining political control for her husband, saying:

> You did it for Rajinda. You did it for Potipoo. Now it's your turn, and you don't know which way to turn. Anyway, you can't turn back now. It's too late. You either carry out the plan or you're finished…The nation needs its redeemer. Is Potipoo a better man than you? Just because he went to Sandhurst and West Point, while you came up through the ranks. But that is where you have the advantage. The troops know you. It's not so long since you were their sergeant-major. You're what is called a soldier's soldier (24).

This Lady-Macbethean approach to authority sets the cycle of power acquisition rolling. Soyinka's appropriation of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, which is patterned on the plot of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, but focuses on the ruling class as engaged in continual undeclared

war against the poor and social radicals (Youker 538), in itself acts as a pastiche – a patchwork of borrowed styles (D'Angelo 40) – on *King Baabu* to historicize the Nigerian leadership's attitude to power. In fact, Maariya summarizes her approach to power and what has been in continuum about the ruling classes and the shitstem as: "First thing now I bash them up and smash them up, then flush them down the mess toilet" (27). This lends weight to the manner in which African heads of state who are convinced of their messianic powers forcefully change constituted laws to fit their caprices. But as inscribed in unwritten laws of African dictatorships to avoid global interference, Maariya advises that the takeover should be bloodless in the spirit of democracy because "Western busybodies won't stand for any bloodshed" (30).

Soyinka takes no prisoners in lambasting the government for its abuse of political office and deep-rooted systemic corruption, and has no sacred cows when criticizing bad leaders in the manner he satirizes their shortcomings in *A Play of Giants* (39). In refuting African dictatorship, Soyinka rouses a postcolonial inquiry into the legitimacy of European monarchical power and control. Is it not ironic that while superpowers debunk military rule for its overt imposition of personal wills, nobody bats an eye at European monarchy (39)? To ensure power continuity, Basha suggests they turn Guatu into a kingdom, but the crowd decodes the ploy and reiterates, "You're bringing in the military through the backdoor" (42). In Nigerian history, it speaks to the Sani Abacha government, which seized power from Ernest Shonekan and shed its army fatigues for civilian clothes. This is a classic demonstration of the same shit, different toilets. Afolayan captures the situation thus:

> *King Baabu* mirrors a time near anarchy in Nigeria when General Sani Abacha's predecessors, General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, annulled the June 12, 1993, presidential election, which was widely believed to have been won by Alhaji Moshood Abiola. Along with other activists who were vocal in their criticism of the annulment of the elections, Soyinka was accused of being a mastermind of the series of bombing that rocked the nation and consequently was listed to face treason charges. (161)

The first stroke for disabling constituted authority is the mastery of crowd mentality and the milking of opportunities. The last veneer in the consolidation of power is convincing the masses of its legitimacy. Soyinka's *King Baabu* explores this political hypocrisy even as the crowd cries out, "It's another military wolf in sheep's clothing" (42). King Baabu ingratiates himself with the poor, claims he is a cultural ideologue who eats with his fingers, denies playing golf with the upper echelons, and professes his attachment to local rhythms like juju or suku-suku (43), which is an examination of class conflict, minority domination and state power that New Historicism explores (Leitch 27). Fueled by Tikim and Maariya, King Baabu claims, "Speaking to you is the voice of the new democracy / I am merely regent of the new democratic order" (44). And like clockwork, the crowd takes the bait but, with skepticism, confesses:

> Look, maybe it's not Basha
> It's democracy in transitional robes.
> Shi-aiw! They're all impostors
> More delaying tactics.
> We're sick of musical chairs.
> Just who the hell are you?
> Don't play games with us – speak!
> Tell us who you really are.
> You're not speaking to fools, you know (44).

The changing face of power is one of the most important attributes of political deception, and in Jarry's typical fashion of using props and masks on which Soyinka roughly positions *King Baabu*, the cycle of power completes its round by convincing the crowd of its good intentions. It not only illustrates New Historicism's ability to give dead records plasticity and life (Veeser 5), but also that "history remained a perfect observer / Hobbling on its crutches / To keep a perspective" (Maiwada 17). By recasting past dictators into the present drama of existence, Soyinka resituates the play in relation to other texts (canonical and non-canonical) in a variety of genres, and also in relation to contemporaneous socio-political institutions and events, as well as discursive and non-discursive practices (Harrison 367).

## The Credo of "Baabu" (Nothingness) and the Dialectics of Influence

The relationship between humankind and the world has always been about power. In the manner that the history of every existing society is shrouded in class struggle (Marx and Engels 390), most leadership structures in sub-Saharan Africa are built around the consolidation of power and the dialectics to maintain it. But most importantly, it is the innocence with which this corridor of influence is approached; often, the "politrickians" come as nobodies with nothing to offer, both literally and metaphorically. This translates into the credo of "baabu" – nothingness – as claimed by Soyinka's anti-hero, Basha, a corrupt version of "Abacha," who, before becoming King Baabu, turns out his pockets, saying, "See for yourself. Empty. Nothing. Baabu" (44). "Baabu" is a Hausa word for nothing, or the lack of something. This stimulates the existentialist question: Is there any such thing as nothing or nothingness? Sartre contends that the word "nothingness" derives its origin from negative judgments (19). In a sense, it is the only being by which a destruction can be accomplished (122) because anything could be built on it, after all, its pondering towards negativity. It is also of transcendence of material absence or limitations. Nothing is excluded; often, many things are subjectively removed. Sartre therefore sees "nothingness as a state of non-being" but again, "being presupposes essence" – existence (131).

Laycock argues that "Nothingness is in a way within being" (94). Nothingness, therefore, is incapable of mounting an absolute opposition to being (94); but Nishitani avers that "true nothingness means that there is no thing as nothingness, and this is absolute nothingness" (70). This signifies that Basha's claim to have nothing materially is non-existent because "nothingness neither opposes nor replaces being, and absence is then interiorized presence," which means that presence unfolds in nothingness (Laycock 98). This suggests that Basha has, and is, everything he denies having, or is everything he claims he is not.

It is on this seemingly innocent notion of nothingness and having nothing, or being a nobody, that the dialectics of influence exerts its claim on power. When the masses protest Basha's ascension as King (44), he pleads, "Look. Not one penny. Baabu kudi" (44). He rekindles the Buddhist mystic Milarepa, who posits, "I need nothing. I seek nothing. I desire nothing" (Soyinka, *The Credo of Being and Nothingness* 9). Though the crowd rejects this claim, Tikim insists Basha is "the architect of a new nation" and deploys the dialectics of influence similar to that employed by Mark Antony after Caesar's death in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (56). Soyinka intertextually alludes to this:

> TIKIM: He took the golf course, the polo field, and gave it back to the people for Operation Fill the Stomach. Was this ambition? Ambition should be made of sterner stuff. The Royal Estates Nominal and Traditional are here to back him. Yes, the evil

> that men do lives after them – but must we wait till the good is interred with their bones? King Baabu is here to serve to the last drop of his blood. (44)

The manner in which power feeds on innocence is the very fuel that greases and gets its wheels running. Tikim claims Basha takes the golf course and polo field and gives it back to the people as though it is a feature of his goodwill, without the crowd's knowledge of the contract bargains he made out of their budgets and taxes. This intertextuality burrows deep into partisan politics and the culture of not only the masses' ignorance but also the people's short memory in relation to theory – saying, and practice – doing. The only moment Basha is truthful is the one time the crowd refuses to believe him (45), as he insists: "But I promise nothing." Vasquez and Riofrancos argue that every society deserves the type of art it gets (Crowdus 49; Lang 74). The burden of proof to this claim could be derived from the present Nigerian President's paradoxical claim that he belongs to everybody and belongs to nobody (Let us not forget the last president, Jonathan, said he had no shoes!). Being everybody's friend makes him nobody's friend. The present President's metamorphosis is similar to Basha's as well as his instituted policies and programs – Operation War Against Indiscipline and Corruption. Most significant is that they are both once military General-Heads-of-States-turned-politicians, as Soyinka documents in "The Spoils of Power: The Buhari-Shagari Casebook" (63-79), as well as Tunde Idiagbon's sadistic contributions.

Of all characters in Soyinka's satire, it is Maariya who understands the dialectics of influence – the tropes of power and its repositories – and deploys them at the right time across instances. Gilles, in his interview with Foucault in 1971, contends that "power to exercise justice is in the hands of forces which work against popular unity" (Foucault 30), and it is therefore requisite to have representation when it comes to the exercise of justice. Maariya seizes the vulnerability of the masses and activates the psychology of crowd mentality. She rebukes her aides for not taking advantage of materialist inclinations: "All you time-wasters, you should always speak to the stomach and the pockets!" (45) as she showers money on the crowd who parochially reiterates: "If this is being baabu, then give us baabu every day!" (46). Maariya buys the consent of the crowd, just as Nigerians are lured with gifts to vote for political candidates without understanding that "today's generosity is tomorrow's starvation" (48). This interrogates a New Historicist tendency to study the artifacts that construct the population's systems of meaning, because those systems define experience (Kelly and Kelly 684).

Soyinka is so outraged by historically entrenched power-drunkenness and bureaucratic corruption in the system that he explores anti-colonial discourse to address it. The deployment of scatology as a technique to right the wrongs of society, which dates back to Aristophanes and Juvenal (Esty 25), is meant to question societal ethos and cultural orientation that foreground national access to resources and their management. Soyinka's *King Baabu* dramatizes the playwright's disillusionment with the lost promises of Independence, but also chastises the change of baton to democracy. Soyinka discountenances the recycling of old despots in monarchical order, particularly those who have failed the country. This rejuvenation of past leaders who embezzle funds from the national treasury is potting the same old shit in different toilets. Armah, for instance, reflected and redirected the symbolic association of excrement inherited from colonial discourses, turning scatology to a new task of representing postcolonial disillusionment. In spite of Baabu's claim of running an Open House Government and bridging the gap between the ruler and the people (50), he forces bankers to sign open cheques for his selfish ends, executes them when they object, and takes charge of the banks (55).

A cardinal trope in the dialectics of influence and abuse of power is its politico-religious bigotry and outright deception. Fanon argues, "the colonial bourgeoisie is aided and abetted in

the pacification of the colonized by the inescapable powers of religion" (28), and this lends weight to why the masses are kept in the dark about the affairs of rulers through religious manipulations. In most cases, sanctimonious clerics donning dubious cloaks come to hoodwink people in power, as was the case of King Baabu. Religion as the opiate of the masses is an understatement in the context of Baabu's acceptance of religious mysticism. The Marabout instigates him into sacrificing hunchbacks and albinos whose lips will be padlocked and buried alive to guarantee no voices rising in protest against his policies (62). This is in line with religious proselytization – "the spiritual regions of the mind have never been divorced from mundane political and territorial power" (Soyinka and Fioupou 8) – and social control. It is this sheer misapplication of religious dogma and rituals that Soyinka satirizes in order to highlight its negative impact on cosmopolitan societies and therefore warns against "seasoned manipulators of the irrational sentiments of faith," knowing that "fundamentalist grounding of religious conviction ministers blindly to power" (Soyinka 141).

Right from *The Open Sore of a Continent*, Soyinka disapproves of the remotest promotion of power-thirsty absolutists and apostates that become control monsters like Baabu at the expense of a population reaping the bitter fruits of such miscalculation (86). Rout calls it a "gross misreading of historic forces at work, nothing less than bourgeois deviationism and criminal adventurism" (87). Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis observe that most times the "politicians present themselves as practitioners of patrimonial virtues" because of the moral demands of their people (212). Thus, when Shoki, Potiplan and Potipoo blame him for playing a part in the coup, he responds with the survival antics of the cycle of power within the shitstem:

> You have to understand. There are moments in history when revolutionary options within the dialectical process of class struggle become severely limited. In this case, we were down to two – Audit or Sod it… (87)

In spite of the brief stint in civilian palace democracy, the military, in the person of Potipoo and his forces, returned to power, which elucidates the New Historicists' recognition of competing centers of power (Pechter 293). It is contemptible that manipulations of the last regime will continue, and this is what New Historicists highlight: to relate alternative history, present hidden transcripts that are defaced and dig out "disturbing anecdotes that incubate within booming triumphalist histories" (Veeser 4). Maariya laments that fake redeemers have proletarianized the masses: "You won't settle accounts, but your accounts are safely stashed away, you know where" (106). This resonates with the political ethos of the belly in Africa, which is located in the continuity of past conflict: what is being fought for is the exclusive right to riches of the beholders of power – their meal tickets (Bayart 235-41). A game of "chop I chop". This speaks to the cyclical rejuvenation of bad leadership within the political spectrum that falls in line with this paper's title: same shit, different toilets and the cycle of power. The immoral inversion of the people's values is evident in the Nigerian system and echoes the principles of the cult of AS in Soyinka's play *Madmen and Specialists,* where the powers that be, similar to *King Baabu*'s visit, inflict atrocities on the lower class. They parrot that their grip on power is both a duty and a historical necessity, with traditions that must be maintained, and are entitled to match the shitstem history for history (Soyinka 70).

## Conclusion

Soyinka's *King Baabu* orchestrates the plight of the masses under different corridors of power, delineates the despotic and corrupt nature of the political transition of power through whatever means necessary, without considering the people's democratic wills or the country's moral

creed. While it speaks with almost prophetic precision to the present Nigerian political system, it satirizes religious mediums deployed by charlatans who, for personal ends, smuggle themselves into the safe books of despots to mislead the people instead of being informed torchbearers of their society. Given Nigeria's political crisis, one wonders if Maiwada was prophetic in his scatological reference to the messy conditions of the country as a state of the anus (7).

Soyinka clinically demonstrates a historical violation of the people's rights, but the play falls short of an optimistic democratic vision in its revisionist circulation of power within the same cabal of power addicts that continue to abuse public offices with impunity while neglecting the arc in the moral compass of personal dignity and honesty. It is also true that Soyinka does not evade sociopolitical responsibilities or misdirect artistic vision, but the ending of *King Baabu* represses alternative power, socialist realist mediations, and denies popular justice the public authorization and instrumentation to dismantle class power, as well as nullifies the classical Marxist emphasis on the emancipatory agency of the working class and oppressed groups. With the exposure of how even the intelligentsia could play into the hands of a failed leadership that masks its true intents behind progressive or religious ideology, Soyinka speaks to the heart of not only Nigeria's underdevelopment but also Africa's rejection of practical approaches towards ensuring the dividends of democratic systems and principles. In line with New Historicism, Soyinka's *King Baabu* stands as a historical testament to the retrogressive powers at the helm of a nation's affairs that should be closely monitored to rewrite a people's history, chart new territories in the promise of a progressive society that upholds social justice, lights the future of individual freedom and is accountable to public service.

## Works Cited

Afolayan, Kayode. "Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* and *King Baabu*: The Crisis Between Ideology and Social Vision." *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2017.

Al-Moghales, Mashhoor Abdu, and Abdulrahman Mokbel Mahyoub Hezam. "Protest Against Military Regime in Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu*." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 5, no. 8, 2015, pp. 1543-51.

Baker, David. "Colonial Beginnings and the Indian Response: The Revolt of 1857–58 in Madhya Pradesh." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, July 1991, pp. 511–43.

Barchiesi, Franco. "African Social Movement." *Routledge Handbook of Pan-Africanism*, edited by Reiland Rabaka, Routledge, 2020.

Barnett, Donald L., and Karari Njama. *Mau Mau from Within: An Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolution*. Modern Reader Paperbacks, 1970.

Bayart, Jean-François. *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. Longman, 1993.

Belmekki, Belkacem. "Muslim Separatism in Post-Revolt India: A British Game of Divide et Impera?" *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 94, no. 1, 2014, pp. 113–24. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44280740.

Booth, James. *Writers and Politics in Nigeria*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1981.

Cheeseman, Nic, et al. *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa: Democracy, Voting and Virtue*. Cambridge UP, 2020.

Crowdus, Gary. "Review: Art and Society—Essays in Marxist Aesthetics by Adolfo Sanchez Vasquez." *Cineaste*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1975, p. 48.

D'Angelo, Frank. "The Rhetoric of Intertextuality." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2010, p. 35.

Esty, Joshua D. "Excremental Postcolonialism." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1999.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2011.

Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Pantheon Books, 1980.
Hamilton, Paul. *Historicism*. Routledge, 1996.
Harrison, Antony. "Matthew Arnold's Gipsies: Intertextuality and New Historicism." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1991, p. 367.
Hohendahl, Peter Uwe. "A Return to History? The New Historicism and Its Agenda." *New German Critique*, no. 55, 1992, p. 87.
Holub, Robert. "New Historicism and the New World Order: The Politics of Textuality and Power in German Studies." *Monatshefte*, vol. 84, no. 2, 1992.
Jeyifo, Biodun. *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. Cambridge UP, 2004.
Kelly, Joseph, and Timothy Kelly. "Social History Update: Searching the Dark Alley: New Historicism and Social History." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1992, p. 684.
Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Translated by Margaret Waller, Columbia UP, 1984.
Kroner, Richard. "History and Historicism." *Journal of Bible and Religion*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1946, p. 134.
Lang, Berel. "Reviewed Works: *Art and Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics* by Adolfo Sanchez Vasquez." *Leonardo*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1977, p. 74.
Laycock, Steven William. *Nothingness and Emptiness: A Buddhist Engagement with the Ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre*. State U of New York P, 2001.
Leitch, Vincent B., editor. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. W. W. Norton, 2001.
Maduakor, Obi. *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to His Writing*. Heinemann, 1991.
Maiwada, Mu'azu. *State of the Anus*. Bookmakers International, 2004.
Malik, Salahuddin. "Nineteenth Century Approaches to the Indian Mutiny." *Journal of Asian History*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1973, pp. 95–127.
Mangena, Tendai. *Contested Criminalities in Zimbabwean Fiction*. Routledge, 2019.
Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Penguin Books, 2000.
Moorcock, Michael. "'Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life' by Alastair Brotchie—A Review." *The Guardian*, 4 Jan. 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/04/alfred-jarry-pataphysical-life-review.
Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo, and Wendy Willems. "Making Sense of Cultural Nationalism and the Politics of Commemoration under the Third Chimurenga in Zimbabwe." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2009, p. 961.
Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. Harcourt, 2003.
Pati, Biswamoy. "Historians and Historiography: Situating 1857." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 19, 2007. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4419570.
P'Bitek, Okot. *Song of Lawino*. Heinemann, 1984.
Pechter, Edward. "The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama." *PMLA*, vol. 102, no. 3, 1987, p. 293.
Piepenbring, Dan. "An Inglorious Slop-pail of a Play." *The Paris Review*, 8 Sept. 2015, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/09/08/an-inglorious-slop-pail-of-a-play/.
Pieters, Jürgen. "New Historicism: Postmodern Historiography between Narrativism and Heterology." *History and Theory*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2000, pp. 23–24.
Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. U of Colorado P, 2011.
Schmidt, Heike. "(Re)Negotiating Marginality: The Maji Maji War and Its Aftermath in Southwestern Tanzania, ca. 1905–1916." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2010, pp. 27–62.
Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. Saddleback Educational Publishing, 2003.

---. *Macbeth*. Yale UP, 2005.
Soyinka, Wole. *The Credo of Being and Nothingness*. Spectrum Books, 1991.
---. *The Interpreters*. Africana Publishing Corporation, 1972.
---. *King Baabu*. Methuen, 2002.
---. *Madmen and Specialists*. Oxford UP, 1971.
---. *Of Africa*. Yale UP, 2012.
---. *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*. Oxford UP, 1996.
---. *A Play of Giants*. Methuen, 2015.
Soyinka, Wole, and Christiane Fioupou. "Of Power, Freedom and Terror." *Présence Africaine*, no. 190, 2014.
Talajooy, Saeed. "Intellectuals as Sacrificial Heroes: A Comparative Study of Bahram Beyzaie and Wole Soyinka." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2015, p. 387.
Veeser, H. Aram. "Re-Membering a Deformed Past: (New) New Historicism." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1991, p. 4.
Youker, Timothy. "War and Peace and Ubu: Colonialism, the Exception and Jarry's Legacy." *Criticism*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2015.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# A Sociopragmatic Investigation of Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path*

**Chibuike Smart Mbarachi and Chinyere Christiana Ndeche**
Department of Language and Linguistics, Spiritan University, Nneochi, Abia, Nigeria

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.8432

**Chibuike Smart Mbarachi** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Language and Linguistics, Spiritan University, Nneochi, Abia State, Nigeria. He holds a PhD in English Language. His research interests are Sociolinguistics, Internet Linguistics, Pragmatics, Stylistics, and Discourse Analysis.

smbarachi@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4076-5034

**Chinyere Christiana Ndeche** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Language and Linguistics, Spiritan University, Nneochi, Abia State, Nigeria. She holds a PhD in English with a specialization in Language. Her research interests are Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis.

ndeche.chinyere@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5805-3442

Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 04-02-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# A Sociopragmatic Investigation of Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path*

**Chibuike Smart Mbarachi and Chinyere Christiana Ndeche**
Department of Language and Linguistics, Spiritan University, Nneochi, Abia, Nigeria

## ABSTRACT

Sociopragmatic study of Nigerian novels has received insufficient research attention. This paper undertakes a sociopragmatic investigation of Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path*. Data for the study were excerpts from the primary text which were considered as evidence of the author's reliance on her sociolinguistic and cultural background in her language use. The excerpted data were analyzed qualitatively and discursively using Pragmatics as the theoretical framework. The result of the data analysis revealed that the language Kilanko uses is contextually Yoruba and Nigerian, hence captures the construction of her dual identity. The language demonstrates a strategy she employs to construct both her indigenous-cum-national identity on the one hand, and her literary English identity on the other. The study shows that a full comprehension of the text requires an understanding of the author's sociolinguistic and cultural background in which different indigenous languages co-exist with English. However, English (an imported language) plays a dominant role in Nigeria's linguistic space, but its co-existence with the indigenous languages shapes the author's literary English.

## KEYWORDS

**Language**

**Identity**

**Sociopragmatics**

**Cultural Background**

## Introduction

Sociopragmatics according to Marina Terkourafi and Natasja Delbar, is concerned with actual language use in real life situations and cultures. It covers the study of social dimensions of language use exploring how social conventions, cultural values, and interpersonal relationships influence language use and meaning. Sociopragmatic meaning therefore, derives from users' social background such as their cultural, ethnic, ideological, and interpersonal orientations, which shapes and is shaped by their use of language. The way language is used can be studied in relation to how the members of the society employ it in their communication activities. In other words, language is usually investigated from a socio-linguistic and sociocultural perspective by observing the linguistic behavior of its users, their expectations, norms, culture, and other social factors that influence its use in a particular context. The word 'context' brings to the fore the importance of meaning construction and comprehension to the way humans use language for communication purposes. Mey posits that the study of language use is essential in view of the fact that language itself is user oriented and may differ from one user to another or from one user group to another as well as from one language to another (*Pragmatics* 40). Mey's argument in this context is that the study of language use is an exploration of what the users do with language whether at the individual or group levels, or while using different languages.

Contact ✉ smbarachi@gmail.com ✉ ndeche.chinyere@gmail.com
©2026

Deducing meaning from an utterance, thus, requires situating the language user with their utterance in context. Juxtaposing language with its users is imperative because individuals in a society possess "underlying rules of speech" and assign social and cultural meaning to words, phrases, and expressions. Members of a given society easily identify and decode these meanings, irrespective of whether or not the usage deviates from established norms (Ervin-Tripp 268). Hence, language can hardly be divorced from its users who use it to communicate their shared meaning, whether or not the meaning differs from the universal or linguistic meaning of the given codes.

There is a significant similarity between language use in real life situations and in fictional circumstances, which predispose both to linguistic investigation. The novel genre provides a fertile ground for the language investigator (Aboh and Uduk 6) as the creative prowess of novelists not only replicates a sociolinguistic and cultural atmosphere where language use approximates what obtains in a real life setting, but enables the writer to exhibit the language habits of their immediate society. In fictional situations, emphasis is usually placed on pragmatic context of the text, if meaning is to be effectively deduced. This may be from the author's sociolinguistic or cultural background, context of their characters, the setting, the story, the thematic preoccupation, etc. But the meaning associated with a text can only be realized in context, without which comprehension may elude the reader or the investigator.

Literature is said to approximate real life situations, hence, in terms of language use, authors through literature, and in addition to using language in their narratives, create into existence their characters' use of language, and dialogically bestow on them the pragmatic competence inherent in their fictional sociolinguistic milieu. Writers use language to 'represent their cultural identity or the identity of their characters or the setting in their literary works' (Abdulrahman 415). This is achieved by not only using language as an instrument with which they mold their characters, settings, and themes, but also by using language to convey their cultural and social contexts. Abdulrahman further affirms that the characters' identities and speech habits are determined by the authors' choice of word, tone, grammar, etc., which portray their socio-economic status, education, or frame of mind (415). Thus, through the affordances of literature, the literary artist acquires the opportunity of using language to socially, culturally, and linguistically create the identity of their characters or that of the authors in their works. Hence, it is very common to observe language use in fictional texts; whether by the authors in their story telling, or through the mouthpiece of their characters, bearing identifiable resemblance with the way language is used in the society where the narrative is set, irrespective of the language used in writing it.

Although most Nigerian novelists have tended to write in English to achieve wider readership, their literary English has always undergone some conditioning to accommodate Nigerian language habits (Mbarachi 441). African writers, which include Nigerian novelists, transplant some of the linguistic behavior of the indigenous African people into English (Igboanusi 55). It seems therefore that Nigerian novelists, like their other African counterparts, would hardly escape the urge to draw linguistic resources from their social and cultural backgrounds, just as they expropriate cultural resources for other aspects of their literary works. For instance, it has been argued that Nigerian literary authors significantly emphasize the features of both the Nigerian language(s) and culture in their works (Igboanusi 54; Aboh and Uduk 8; Mbarachi and Igwenyi 30).

The investigation of language use in literary texts implies in part, an exploration into how sociolinguistic and pragmatic actions are fed from culture and society and how authors draw resources from their cultural and societal reservoir to shape their literary enterprise. Mey refers to a study of literary pragmatics in such a context as resulting from the need for "clarification of the relationships between humans, their words, and their worlds" through literature ("Literary

Pragmatics" 788). Mey's position suggests that the reader can glean the social and cultural identity of an author from the way language is used in a novel. Algeo argues that 'whatever language we speak... helps to define us and identify the community we belong to' (1), which is an indication that language is a marker of identity as it is used to construct identity whether we speak in the real world, use language in narratives, or in dialogue through the mouthpiece of the fictional characters.

Literature indicates that sociopragmatic study of language use in fiction has been done in diverse ways. For instance, Ahmed Ben Amara and Abdulfattah Omar did a sociopragmatic study of Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma,* focusing on home, exile and alienation and how they relate to identity in the novel. They conclude that sociopragmatic approach clarified alienation in the text by revealing the social, cultural, and economic challenges that are evident in diaspora literature (Amara and Omar 82). Similarly, Wafaa Mahdi's sociopragmatic analyses of persecution in selected American novels revealed how abusers or perpetrators of violence in the text insult their victim, and flout the conversational maxims of quality and relevance (8, 9). Abdulkarim Jameel's sociopragmatic study of sarcasm in selected literary texts showed that beyond humor, sarcasm enriches the literary texts and gives clarity to the wider areas of pragmatics and sociolinguistics and their roles in understanding meaning of language from the perspectives of culture and the society (83). Jameel's study is relevant to the present study as it emphasizes the roles of the pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors as well as the cultural background in understanding meaning in literary texts. However, Jameel's study focused on sarcasm. In addition, the previous studies used texts which differentiate their study from our present investigation.

Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* (henceforth *Daughters*) has received substantial literary research attention, but studies on how language is explored in her text are sparse, almost non-existent. Due to the insufficient research attention given to the linguistic study of the text, particularly from the sociopragmatic point of view, it becomes imperative to fill this gap. Whereas sociolinguistics studies the linguistic behavior of language users in social settings, pragmatics focuses on how the users communicate their shared meaning using language in context. Sociopragmatics combine both sociolinguistics and pragmatics in its approach. The main objective in this study therefore is to undertake a sociopragmatic investigation of Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters.* The choice of selecting Kilanko's *Daughters* is partly informed by the insufficient language research attention it has received, and the noticeable features of the indigenous language codes and habits of the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria found in her text. In this study, we argue that though the characters in the text are fictional, the sociolinguistic and sociocultural variables and ideas in their world which are expressed in their speech and the narrative are not. They are exactly the same that exist, and that are used in the society where the novel is set – Ibadan Nigeria. These variables are contextual, and also mark the linguistic and cultural identity of the society and its members which the author intentionally constructs.

## Analytical Framework

Pragmatics is a theory of appropriateness, as meaning is derived from the way language is used and how they connect to the context in which they are spoken, rather than from the words and sentence constructions (Leech 5). Pragmatic contexts may be linguistic, sociological, cultural, etc. The application of this framework can enable an analyst to identify "significant patterns of interaction in particular social situations and systems … which may be realized differently in different social contexts and situations as well as in various social groups within a speech

community" (Harlow 328). Language as "a system of meanings" is functional, which implies that when people use language, their linguistic acts perform meaningful functions (Bloor and Bloor 12; Halliday and Matthiessen 61). Some of these functions may be culture specific, hence contextual, and pragmatic in nature given that pragmatics focuses more on what people do with language (i.e. the uses and users).

Pragmatics as a framework is applied to this study to demonstrate that the English Kilanko uses in *Daughters* consists of lexical and utterance level data which are largely drawn from the Yoruba language in particular and Nigerian multilingual society in general. The identified data predisposes an analyst to gainfully conclude that the novel linguistically and pragmatically bears Yoruba-cum-Nigerian identity. Using the pragmatic theory to support our position, we further argue, using data evidence, that though the text is written in English, this English is contextually Nigerian as it has been conditioned to the extent that it bears the marks and features of Nigerian English as affirmed in literature (Achebe 29; Aboh and Uduk 8; Mbarachi 457), hence, evidences the construction of identity by the author.

This study adopts a qualitative and discursive approach both in data collection and analyses. Excerpts of discourse situations (from the narrative and dialogues) comprising lexical items, phrases, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, etc., were extracted from the primary text and analyzed qualitatively, employing the sociopragmatic approach to account for the ways the author uses language to depict her sociolinguistic and sociocultural background and by so doing, imbues in her novel her Yoruba and Nigerian identity as reflected by the indigenous language insertions in the text. The reader is not in doubt about the author's place of origin considering the multiplicity of Yoruba words, phrases, idioms, etc., and other Nigerian language data in the text.

## Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters*

The story in *Daughters* centers on Morayo and Eniayo her younger sister, who is an Albino. Both are happy, growing up in their middle income family with many school friends and relatives in contemporary city of Ibadan, Nigeria. The two sisters are overjoyed that a cousin of theirs Bros T whom they see as a big 'brother' has moved in with them, but Bros T's coming becomes a nightmare for Morayo who is sexually violated thereby forcing her to hold on to a disgraceful secret. Morayo learns to safeguard herself and her sister. Only Aunty Morenike gives Morayo support, which enables her to recover after courageously revealing her experience.

## Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The analyses of the data revealed that though the language Yejide Kilanko uses in *Daughters* is English, it is laced with sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and cultural communication habits that are indigenous to Nigeria in general and the Yoruba ethnic group in particular. These data that populate the novel under study, evidences the author's imposition of her Nigerianness on the English used in the novel, hence an indication of her identity construction strategy in the novel. The predominance of features of indigenous languages in the text highlights the author's intentionality in the exportation or exhibition of her Nigerian and Yoruba culture linguistically using the novel genre. The following sub-sections present the findings using excerpted data evidence to show how the expressions are sociopragmatic and reflect Nigerian speech habits.

## Lexical Borrowing as Identity Construction Strategy

Lexical borrowing refers to the author's deployment of words from the Nigerian indigenous languages into the English used in writing the novel. This strategy reflects the author's boldness in making Yoruba and some other Nigerian words visible in the novel thereby using them to portray her Nigerian identity. The following table (Table 1) contains the lexically borrowed items that depict Nigerian identity construction by the author.

**Table 1:**
Data on Lexical Borrowing

| S/N | Items | Meaning | Source | Page No. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Iro | Fabric wrapped around the waist by women | Yoruba | 2 & 108 |
| 2. | Buba | Blouse worn with *iro* | Yoruba | 2 &108 |
| 3. | Adire | Traditional indigo-dyed textile | Yoruba | 2 |
| 4. | Gele | Headtie | Yoruba | 24 |
| 5. | Afin | Albino | Yoruba | 30 |
| 6. | Arewa | Northern Nigeria | Hausa | 19 |
| 7. | Sisi | Young stylish woman | Yoruba | 19 |
| 8. | Kilode | What is happening | Yoruba | 24 &37 |
| 9. | Pele | Sorry | Yoruba | 27 |
| 10. | Koboko | Horsewhip | Hausa | 16 |
| 11 | Ayo | A traditional wooden board game | Yoruba | 27 |
| 12. | Oya | Hurry up | Yoruba/Pidgin | 35 |
| 13. | Ekaro | Good morning | Yoruba | 36 |
| 14. | Aburo | Younger sibling | Yoruba | 36 |
| 15. | Mi | My | Yoruba | 36 |
| 16 | Gori mapa | Completely shaved or bald head | Yoruba | 41 |
| 17 | Agbanumo | Star apple fruit | Yoruba | 52 |
| 18. | Shebi | Isn't it? | Yoruba | 55 |
| 19. | Nne | Mother | Igbo | 66 |
| 20. | Agbaya | Insult, meaning bad or childish elder | Yoruba | 143 |
| 21. | Ube | African pear | Igbo | 262 |
| 22. | Obim | My heart | Igbo | 257 |
| 23. | Walahi | By God or I swear to God | Arabic | 236 |
| 24. | Shege | Curse meaning impolite or bastard. Now means unpleasant situation. | Hausa | 287 |
| 25. | Ashawo | Insult, meaning prostitute | Yoruba | 222 |
| 26. | Ajo | Collective contributions or savings | Yoruba | 204 |
| 27. | Olodumare | God or creator | Yoruba | 302 |
| 28. | Haba | Interjection used to express surprise, anger, disappointment, or emotion. | Hausa | 229/ 236 |
| 29. | Yabis | Competitive insult | Pidgin | 49 |

Source: Data collected by the authors.

The lexically borrowed words in Table 1 are self-explanatory as their meanings are already included for easy understanding. However, some of these lexical items are classified into clothing materials or fashion, such as iro, buba, adire, and gele; Fruits such as Agbanumo, and ube; words denoting insult, for instance, agbaya, shege, and ashawo; Naming words - Arewa, Sisi, Koboko, and ayo; endearment terms - Nne, aburo, and obim. The borrowing of the lexical items from the Nigerian indigenous languages by Kilanko is strategic. First is her need to replicate what obtains in the Nigerian society, including language use, in her novel, as the novel is set in Ibadan, Nigeria. Secondly, bilinguals and multi-linguals are known to resort to the use of codes from their linguistic reservoir that most appropriately express the ideas and thoughts they wish to communicate. This is one of the causes of code mixing and code switching in multilingual environments. Thirdly, the author's use of these borrowed lexical items enables her to get her readers acquainted with her place of origin, hence constructing her identity.

## Identity Hybridization

According to Alobo, hybridization refers to the combination of two lexical items from two languages (165). Hybridization in Nigerian literary works usually involves the combination of an indigenous language and English. This underscores the identity construction of the contemporary Nigerian writer who needs to write in a Western language for wider readership, and still attempts to convey their African sensibilities linguistically, resulting in hybrid identities (Aboh 6). Igboanusi labels this feature as loan blends and posits that it involves the placement of two items from two languages side by side to form a nominal group (61). One of the items functions as the headword, while the other item from the target language functions as the modifier. The Nigerian literary writer has been seen as possessing dual identities due to their use of a Western language (English) to express their Nigerian worldview. The following excerpts in italics are some of the loan blends identified in Kilanko's *Daughters* which indicate hybridization of the author's identity:

(31) Aunty Adunni ... was busy chopping up fresh spinach for *egusi soup* (p.37). This means melon soup. (Melon is the major ingredient used in making this soup type)
(32) By the way, Bembe, last week I saw your father at Bere market hawking *kan-kan sponges* he made from his beard. (p.50) - *Kan-kan* means local fiber sponges in Yoruba.
(33) "*Eyin boys*, please leave Kachi alone". (p.50) - This means *you* (plural) boys.
(34) Her price was usually a bottle of Fanta and one packet of *Okin biscuits*. *Okin biscuits* were produced by Okin Biscuit Factory located in Kwara state Nigeria (Now closed).
(35) *Mama Put*, who owned the little canteen at the center of the market … (p.84). This is a Nigerian coinage for a food vendor.
(36) He grinned, licking his thick *kpomo lips*. (p.204) - *Kpomo* is a Yoruba word for cow-skin, especially the head region.
(37) "He is definitely better than the *Sango worshipper* I met on your birthday last year". (p.209) - *Sango* is the Yoruba god of thunder, lightning, and fire worshipped in the Yoruba traditional religion.
(38) I soon fell asleep, and that night, the haunting *Oja flute* played on in my dreams. (p.265)

The italicized items in the excerpted data in numbers 31 to 38 are hybridized lexical items employed by the author in the text. English and Nigerian indigenous language items are combined in the hybridization process. Some of them are common cultural expressions used in

Nigeria, but are partially translated into English by the author. For example, *egusi soup* (p.37) is rendered *ofe egusi* in Igbo, where *ofe* means soup. *Egusi soup* is a popular delicacy enjoyed throughout Nigeria and has become one of the markers of Nigeria's food identity. In this example, *egusi* (Igbo word for melon) is the modifier while the head word is soup. In number 32, *kan-kan sponges* refer to local sponges popularly known as *kan-kan ibile* in Yoruba which means traditional sponge. In this example, there is a repetition because both *kan-kan* and sponge mean the same. Another example of such repetition is *oja flute* (p.265). Both *oja* and flute mean the same. The rendering of the same word both in English and in an indigenous language is the strategy Kilanko adopts to enable the non-Nigerian reader of the novel to comprehend the meaning of *kan-kan*, or *oja*, rather than just using the word sponges or flute. By adding *kan-kan* and *oja* instead of just sponges and flute, she forces the reader to also get acquainted with the traditional type of sponge and flute in Nigeria, which differs from the ones made with other materials and used in other countries.

The name *Mama Put* simply means a food vendor, but with slightly varied contextual differences. It is a loan blend derived from mobile cooked food selling, a business predominantly run by women hence the use of 'mama' meaning mother. It can refer to a street food stand or roadside restaurant. It can also be used as a name for a woman who sells food from a cart or stall, or also refer to the food bought from a street or roadside vendor. In excerpt 35, its context refers to the woman who sells cooked food at the market. *'Kpomo lips'* in 36 is a metaphor for the thickness of Morayo's male classmate's lips. Kpomo is a Yoruba word for cow skin which is usually very thick in nature. Morayo's classmate's lips are likened to kpomo to capture its thickness but Kilanko uses the *kpomo* and lips to achieve a loan blend and at the same time, impose the Yoruba word on English. The word 'lips' is the headword, while *kpomo* is the modifier in the example.

Hybridization therefore offers Kilanko the opportunity to display her Nigerian identity linguistically, and equally demonstrates her ability to fuse elements from the Nigerian indigenous languages in the English she creatively uses as an acknowledgement of her hybridized (dual) identity.

## Neologisms

Neologisms are newly formed words in a language, or existing words that may have acquired new meanings (Mbarachi 448). This is another feature observed in *Daughters* which is a common feature of Nigerian English. Some coinages are derived from acronyms in Nigeria which are used as if they were common English words. Igboanusi observes that neologisms characterize the nativization process which English in Nigeria has been made to undergo (59). The following are some examples of neologisms identified in the text under study:

(38) But instead, she begged Mummy to let her go and live in one of the rooms in the *Boys' Quarters*. (p.40) – *Boys Quarters* means a little building behind the main house.
(39) After a few moments of yelling, he found a customer in one of the three-story, multi-tenanted "face me, I face you" buildings across the road. (p.61) – These are buildings with a long passage/walkway with a group of one or two-room apartments which have their entrances facing each other.
(40) It was possible to tell which ones were *jambites*, first year students like me. (p.194)
(41) Dee was an *Aristo*. Not only did he have a silver spoon hanging out of his mouth, he had a silver fork and knife too. (p.202) – *Aristo* refers to very rich young men or male

students who solicit for transactional sex or intimate relationships with the female students.

(42) My dormitory room housed nineteen other female *corpers*. (p.224) – *corpers* is an informal term that refers to the members of the National Youth Service Corpse (NYSC) in Nigeria. The NYSC is a mandatory one year national service for Nigerian tertiary school graduates, which fosters national unity as these graduates are posted to different states of the federation for the service. The members are informally referred to as *corper* (singular) or *corpers* (plural).

The neologisms in numbers 38 to 42 are a reflection of common peculiar usages in Nigerian English. The use of *Boys' Quarters* in number 38 is a type of residential house. The name equally captures the class differences that exist in the type of residential houses occupied by low income, middle income, and high income earners. For instance, the domestic staffs to middle class and high income civil servants, such as the drivers, gatekeepers, house maids, etc., are the ones who usually live in the *Boys quarters*, while their employers live in the main buildings. In number 39, *face me, I face you,* is an informal name given to a type of accommodation usually built for low income people. The rooms are built in such a way that their doors face each other across a long narrow passage, hence the coinage. The neologism *Jambites* is coined from the acronym JAMB which stands for the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board. This is a body saddled with the responsibility of conducting the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) for candidates seeking admission into tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Those who pass this examination are usually admitted to study the course of their choice in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. The neologism *jambites* refer to the newly admitted students of higher institutions of learning in Nigeria who secured their admission by passing the UTME conducted by JAMB.

In the use of the word Aristo (number 41), the author recognizes the class division in the Nigerian society and one of the coinages Nigerians use in expressing this class differences. The word Aristo is commonly used particularly in tertiary school environments in Nigeria to refer to rich young men who are either married or single, who are financially capable of financing transactional sexual relationship with young women in tertiary institutions. Sometimes, students use the name Aristo to refer to rich men who come from outside the campuses to meet their female lovers.

Through the use of neologisms in *Daughters*, the author demonstrates her knowledge of these coinages, and equally affirms the creative nature of language in a multilingual sociolinguistic environment such as Nigeria. In addition, she makes her readers to encounter these codes and their meaning, and by so doing, coerces them into embracing the existence of such usages in Nigeria.

## Code-Switching and Code-Mixing

Although some scholars use the terms code-switching and code-mixing interchangeably, the general consensus is that code-switching is sentential while code mixing is intra sentential (Waris 124; Harya 89). In other words, while code mixing refers to the use of a word or phrase from one language within the structure of another language, code switching involves the use of structurally arranged expressions from one language to another. This becomes clearer when different clauses and sentences are switched from one language to another within the same discourse. Getha and Kamatchi posit that code switching and code mixing differ theoretically based on the grammatical items utilized in their process (233).

Incidences of code-switching and code-mixing have been identified in the text. It is instructive to note that code-switching and code-mixing are features of languages in contact. With over 500 indigenous languages in existence in Nigeria (Crystal 52), code-switching, and code-mixing are regular sociolinguistic occurrences in Nigeria's linguistic space as most Nigerians are either bilinguals or multi-linguals. However, for the purpose of this analysis, we have only excerpted code-switching in this section, given that most of the indigenous lexical items that are used by the author to code mix with English have already been extracted and discussed under lexical borrowing. The following excerpts are the examples of code-switching identified in the text under study:

(43) …because our daddy was *eni ti o ti apata dide*, a person who arose from a rock (p.19)
(44) Morayo, *kilo de*? Why is your face so long? (p.24). *Kilode* means what is it?
(45) "*Ema sukum*. It's okay, Grandma." (p.144)
(46) "Mama *e jo eda ri ji mi*" (p.169).
(47) Morili *oloko kan* (p.183). This means a one man woman.
(48) "Hasbunallah wa ni malwakil ..." (p.187) This is Arabic and means "Sufficient for us is Allah, and He is the best Disposer of affairs."
(49) Julius abeg, make we dey go". (p.187) pidgin
(50) "E se gan ni, Ma" (p.188). Thank you very much Ma
(51) "Ekule, Ma (p.189)
(52) "Babes, your Bobo nice dey wait you outside (p.206) (Referring to Ladi her boyfriend)
(53) Miss Night Ride, bad morning to you, "yeye ashawo girl. Na book your papa and mama send you come university come read. Na so so man, you go dey follow". (p.215)
(54) "With this your waka waka, you fit get Phd for man-ological sciences" (p.215)
(55) "Do you know the saying, Folorunsho to ofi okun ogede gun igi ope?" (p.216)
(56) "Oga make you take am easy o!" (p.224)
(57) "Madam a beg. I no steal your pant." "Shut up your lying mouth" *Ole*! Thief! (p.229)
(58) "Madam, em, abeg no vex o." You know say I like you well well. (p.237)
(59) "Uncle, I go marry you with this my fine Aunty, we dey for back here." (p.242)
(60) "Morayo, a huru m gi n'anya." (p.253) (This is Igbo and means I love you in English)

Data numbers 43 to 60 represent the author's insertion of clauses or sentences that are either constructed using indigenous lexical items or phrases, and/or Nigerian pidgin elements, within the story or conversations in the novel resulting in code-switching. The code switched data predominantly involves switching from English (the language in which the novel is written) to Yoruba, English to Nigerian Pidgin, or English to Igbo. For instance, Kilanko uses the Yoruba expression *eni ti o ti apata dide* in excerpt 43 through the mouthpiece of Morayo to inform the reader that her Daddy is strong. This is not only an insertion of a Yoruba sentence, but also an expression of the Yoruba worldview of procreation or belief system which indicates that a person originated from a rock and that this type of origin makes one to be strong. In spite of code-switching from English to indigenous languages, the author cushions the code-switched portions of the discourse by either giving a hint to their meaning or giving their English translation to enhance the non-Nigerian readers' understanding of the text. This is exemplified in excerpt number 44, when Morayo's Mother asks her "Morayo, *kilo de*?" *Kilo de* in Yoruba simply means what is it or what happened in English. In this excerpt (no. 44); there is a further demand by Mother for information by asking Morayo "Why is your face so long?" This affords

the non-Yoruba reader the opportunity to decipher the meaning of *kilo de.* In number 60, the expression, *Morayo, a huru m gi n'anya* is an Igbo sentence which translates to 'Morayo, I love you' in English.

Kilanko also uses a lot of Nigerian pidgin clauses and sentences in *Daughters* as if all her readers could understand and use them in their communication events. Nigerian pidgin, which is also known as *Naija* is a non-ethnic-based unifying language in Nigeria. It is spoken by all, irrespective of their social status, level of education, or ethnic background. It has also become a marker of Nigeria's linguistic identity and Kilanko uses it generously to construct this identity in her fiction. In number 56, the use of the pidgin sentence "Oga make you take am easy o!" simply means 'sir, take it easy'. However, the pidgin word *oga* can mean different things in Nigeria depending on the context. It can mean boss or one's employer, it can mean master, manager, director, one's superior, etc. It can also be used to address an older person as a mark of respect. In the context of this excerpt, it refers to the bus driver who probably may be older than the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) members who are still young. The use of the word *Oga* therefore captures the Nigerian culture of respect to elders which defines the interpersonal relationship that exists among interlocutors. In 58, the pidgin expression "Madam, em, abeg no vex o" simply means Madam, please don't be offended or angry. The second part of the excerpt "You know say I like you well well" means 'you know that I like you very much'. In pidgin, words are often repeated for emphasis. By switching from English to pidgin, Kilanko activates the unique expressive power of Nigerian pidgin in her story, and arouses the foreign readers' curiosity to this language variety and how she combines it with Yoruba, Igbo, and English, to create her literary English.

## Cultural Usages

Apart from giving the culture of a people expression, language use can also enhance the transportation of a people's language habits to global awareness using the affordances of another language. By this, we mean that there are instances of language use in *Daughters*, which though are expressed in English, represent the language habits, thoughts, and cultural discourse patterns of the author's nationality. Aboh and Uduk argue that "the Nigerian writer's use of language is an expression of indigenous thoughts in English words" (10). The analysis revealed that though Kilanko uses English language in her writing, there are expressions in the text that depict the Yoruba and Nigerian thoughts and discourse patterns but worded in English, hence an exportation of her culture. The data classified as cultural usages in this paper comprises idiomatic expressions, semantic or collocational extensions, proverbs, etc., that are either Yoruba culture specific or that represent the Nigerian culture in general. The following are examples of the data in this category.

(61) Daddy always says that cows were the king of the road, since it was impossible for a car to win an argument against them (p.2)
(62) "It is not from my mouth that they will hear that the teacher's mother had died". (p.151)
(63) Kachi, don't mind Bembe. You know he has a *big mouth* (p.50).
(64) …my wet blouse had plastered itself to the little mounds on my chest (p.17)
(65) "I overheard another cousin say that Aunty Morenike's child Damilare was *a result of her experience with men*". (p.55)
(66) I felt a sharp pain go right through *my center* (p.74).
(67) 'Bros T has been *coming to my room at night'* (p. 87)

(68) "And so? ...Just because you neglected to teach your wayward daughter how to *keep her legs together*" (p.120)
(69) Why are you borrowing extra worry from tomorrow?" (p.248)
(70) Our people have a way of ignoring leprosy while dedicate ourselves to the cure of ringworm" (p.164)
(71) "Uncle, I go marry you with this my fine Aunty, we dey for back here." (p.242)

In number 61, Kilanko, using Morayo the protagonist, tells her readers the viewpoints of Daddy regarding the obstructive nature of cows on Nigerian roads. Two usages are significant in this excerpt. One is that *cows were king of the roads*. This is the use of personification to express the menace of the reckless and inconsiderate take-over of Nigerian roads by herdsmen and their cows irrespective of the traffic challenges and the danger they pose to road users. Kings are authoritative, and labeling the cows as kings exemplifies the authoritative and careless manner in which they are led to the roads by their herders who value these cows more than human lives in Nigeria. The second usage in number 61 is that *it was impossible for a car to win an argument against them.* Winning an argument against the cows is an idiomatic expression which means getting them to leave the road. In a way, this is also a personification given that only humans can argue with fellow humans. However, the two expressions contained in data number 61 underscores on one hand, the cultural usages in Nigeria, and on the other hand, the contemporary challenges posed by the herders and their cows in Nigeria.

Other idioms are *big mouth* in number 63 which means talk too much, and *keep her legs together* in number 68 which means not to engage in sexual intercourse. The use of *marry* in number 71 is common in Lagos Nigeria, where transport operators who do not have change to give to different disembarking passengers who paid with higher currency denominations, joins two or three people together by giving them a high denomination currency that covers their combined change (amount) to share amongst them. This is usually referred to as 'marry'. There are also semantic extensions such as *little mounds on my chest* in 64, which means breasts, and *my centre* in number 66 which means vagina, as well as *coming to my room at night* in 67, which translates to having sex with me. In these examples, the meaning of the words used is extended beyond their literal or primary meaning. Some of these expressions are also considered too harsh and taboos in Nigerian culture, and are not usually expressed directly. For instance, the Nigerian culture abhors direct reference to certain private body parts such as the genitals. They are usually expressed euphemistically using words that soften and make them milder. Kilanko thus explores these cultural usages, but translates them into English.

Number 62 contains a proverb. Proverbs are wise, metaphorical, and cultural expressions that exist in every language. Here Morayo says "It is not from my mouth that they will hear that the teacher's mother had died" (p.151). This simply means that she will not be the one to reveal something very unpleasant. In other words, she will not be the bearer of bad news. Another example of proverbs in the text is data number 70 which is credited to Daddy who says "Our people have a way of ignoring leprosy while dedicate ourselves to the cure of ringworm." This proverb means that people waste time and energy on less important thing while ignoring the most important one. Here, Daddy refuses to believe that the flood has anything to do with the anger of the River goddess' as suggested by the traditionalists, rather, he identifies that the flood was caused by dumping of refuse in the river which blocked its pathway making it to overflow during heavy rainfall.

## Conclusion

This study has revealed that language use and its comprehension depend largely on the meanings offered by the user's sociocultural background. Given that fiction draws from real life situations, this study has shown that Kilanko draws from her culture and uses linguistic resources from this background as her standpoint to exhibit her indigenous identity which she creatively expresses in English. She demonstrates her success in constructing another identity which is her literary English identity.

This study has also shown that though literary writers often use foreign languages to achieve wider readership, the imprints of their indigenous linguistic and cultural resources are visible. It is hoped that research will focus attention on such sociolinguistic and cultural inputs for a clearer understanding of the society, the people and the culture captured in literary texts as approximates of their real-life counterparts. This study equally revealed that literary communication highlights the sociolinguistic features of languages in contact.

## Works Cited

Abdulrahman, Muna Ali. "The Role of Language in Shaping Literary Identity: A Comparative Study of Modern English Literature." *Journal of Management World*, 2, 2025, pp. 414-419. Doi:10.53935/jomw.v2024i4.957

Aboh, Romanus. *Language and the Construction of Multiple Identities in the Nigerian Novel*. 1st ed., African Humanities Program, 2018.

Aboh, Romanus & Happiness Uduk. "The Pragmatics of Nigerian English in Chimamanda Adichie's Novels." *Journal of Language and Education*, Volume 2, Issue 3, 2016, pp. 6-13. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17323/2411-7390-2016-2-3-6-13

Achebe, Chinua. "English and the African Writer." *Transition*, No. 18, 1965, pp. 27 – 30.

Algeo, John. *The Origins and Development of the English Language*. Wadsworth, 2010.

Alobo, Jacob Otor. "Towards Domestication of English Language in Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges". *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, vol. 3, no. 7, July 2015, https://www.internationaljournalcorner.com/index.php/theijhss/article/view/140186.

Amara, Ahmed Ben, and Abdulfattah Omar. "A Sociopragmatic Analysis of Alienation in Fadia Faqir's My Name is Salma". *Applied Linguistic Research Journal*, Vol. 5 no. 1, 2021, pp. 76-83. doi: 10.14744/alrj.2020.29494

Bloor, Thomas, and Meriel Bloor. *The Functional Analysis of English*. Routledge, 2004. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203774854

Crystal, David. *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Ervin-Tripp, Susan M. "Sociolinguistics." Language, Culture and Society: A Book of Readings. Winthrop Publishers, 1974, pp. 268-334.

Geetha, V. & Kamatchi, B. "Code Mixing and Code Switching in Tamil Proverbs." *Language in India*, Volume 10, Vol. 5, May 2010, pp. 232-241.

Halliday, Michael A. K., & Matthiessen, Christian M. I. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. Routledge, 2004.

Harlow, Linda L. "Do They Mean What They Say? Sociopragmatic Competence and Second Language Learners." *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 74, No. 3, 1990, pp.328-351.

Harya, Trisna Dinillah. "Sociolinguistics (Code: Code Switching and Code Mixing)." *LENTERA: Jurnal Ilmiah Kependidikan*, Vol. 11, 2018, pp. 87-98.

Haugh M., Kádár D. Z., and Terkourafi M. "Introduction: Directions in Sociopragmatics." Edited by Haugh M, Kádár D. Z. and Terkourafi, M, *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociopragmatics. Cambridge Handbooks in Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 1-12.

Igboanusi, Herbart. "The Igbo Traditions in the Nigerian Novel." *African Study Monograph*, 22(2): July, 2001, pp. 53-72, July, 2001.

Jameel, Abdulkarim Fadhil. "A Sociopragmatic Study of Sarcasm in Selected Literary Texts." *International Journal of Advancement in Social Science and Humanity* (IJASSH), Vol. No. 18, Jul-Dec 2024, pp. 83-95.

Kilanko, Yejide. *Daughters Who Walk This Path*. Kahifo Limited, 2012

Leech, Geoffrey N. *Principles of pragmatics*. Longman, 1983.

Mahdi, Wafaa Abd Ali. "A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis of Woman Persecution in Selected American Novel". *Hmlyan Jr Edu Lte*; Vol 4, Iss. 6, 2023 pp. 1-11. doi:10.47310/Hjel.2023.v04i06.001

Mbarachi, Chibuike Smart. "Domestication of English in the Nigerian Novel: Lexical and Pragmatic Evidence from Chimamanda Adichie's Americanah." *West African Varieties of English, Literature, Pidgins and Creoles*, edited by Luke Eyo, and Juliet Udoudom, Development Universal Consortia, 2017, pp. 439 – 461.

Mbarachi, Chibuike Smart and Esther Igwenyi. "Language, Identity, and Cultural Context of Names in Selected Nigerian Novels." *International Journal of Language and Literature*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2018, pp. 29 – 37.

Mey, Jacob L. "Literary Pragmatics." *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, Basil Blackwell, 2005, pp. 787–797. 10.1002/9780470753460.ch41

Mey, Jacob L. *Pragmatics*, 2nd Edition. Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Terkourafi, Marina and Natasja Delbar. Sociopragmatics. *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2023. DOI: 10.1093/obo/9780199772810-0312

Waris, Ahmad Mustamir. "Code Switching and Mixing (Communication in Learning Language)." *Jurnal Dakwah Tabligh*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Juni 2012, pp. 123 - 135.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# The *hijra* in Arabic Media Context: A Corpus-assisted Discourse Collocation Analysis

**Azouz Belkharraf[a] and Zakariae Azennoud[b]**
[a]Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, [b]Sultan Moulay Slimane University

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.9442

**Azouz Belkharraf** is a doctoral student at Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University in Fez, affiliated with the Laboratory of *Discourse, Creativity, Society and Religions*. His research focuses on analyzing social phenomena, including migration, through critical discourse analysis.

belkharafazooz@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2011-8178

**Zakariae Azennoud** is a Lecturer in English at the Polydisciplinary Faculty of Khouribga, Sultan Moulay Slimane University. His research interests include corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, semiotics, sociolinguistics, literature, and foreign language acquisition.

zakariae.azennoud@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2342-8766

Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 25-01-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# The *hijra* in Arabic Media Context: A Corpus-assisted Discourse Collocation Analysis

**Azouz Belkharraf[a] and Zakariae Azennoud[b]**
[a]Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, [b]Sultan Moulay Slimane University

## ABSTRACT

The Arabic word *hijra*, the equivalent of (im)migration, has played a significant part in modern media discourse. Its occurrence is determined by a variety of systematic collocational patterns that convey a range of socio-cultural implications. While the debate has been developing over recent years about the reasons and objectives of *hijra*, as a social problem, youth-centric hope, or geo-political crisis, recent empirical research remains correspondingly limited. The present study adopts a corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADA) approach to explore the word in context, by operationalizing the collocational networks of relationships among lexical items co-occurring with *hijra*. By running three statistical association measures (AMs), namely Log Dice, MI, and Delta P in GraphColl, the study analyzes four dimensions of collocability related to the node *hijra*: frequency, exclusivity, connectivity, and dispersion, in a specially designed corpus of written media, drawn from various Arabic newspapers. The analysis identifies significant patterns of word combinations that allow reasoned judgments of some underlying socio-cultural factors influencing the *hijra* as a significant discursive unit and as a contingent, prospective act. Founded on corpus-based evidence, this exploratory work seeks to expand research interest in the increasingly influential English-dominant CADA approaches and to encourage their broader application in Arabic

## KEYWORDS

***Hijra***

**Migration**

**Corpus-assisted Discourse Analysis**

**Collocational Networks**

**Association Measures**

## Introduction

Frequency is a key element in corpus linguistics. Abstracted from it are empirical generalizations about the occurrence and co-occurrence patterns of language in natural context. Frequent and exclusive linguistic relationships can be demonstrated by examining chunks of language in use. In particular, John R. Firth identified collocations in his *Papers in Linguistics* as a way of pursuing this empirical demonstration. *Collocation* refers to the systematic co-occurrence of words in texts and discourse that can be highlighted statistically. As corpus linguistics, the empirical approach to the description of language use (Tognini-Bonelli 2), looks at language from a social perspective (Teubert 8), the study of collocations can be extended to the layers of discourse, offering deeper insights into the actual performance of its users.

In this context, the present research introduces a discursive social phenomenon, *hijra*[1] هجرة (immigration), using an analytical corpus linguistic method. Particularly, collocation analysis is adopted in order to investigate the lexico-semantic associations related to the *hijra* in the written Arabic media discourse. The collocational networks of relationships among lexical

Contact ✉ belkharafazooz@gmail.com ✉ zakariae.azennoud@gmail.com
©2026

items co-occurring with *hijra* help interpret the context of use in which the term *hijra* operates. The primary objective of the study is, therefore, to arrive at the underlying socio-cultural factors influencing the *hijra* as a primed discursive concept and act. Far beyond the empirical results, there is the potential to explore how the phenomenon is visualized from regionally specific perspectives, mainly the Maghreb and the Middle East. To achieve this objective, this research addresses three main questions: (i) The core items that co-occur with *hijra* in the written media context, (ii) how they are distributed across the texts produced by different Arabic media sources, and (iii) how the overall collocational networks can be functionally interpreted. To answer the questions above, it is necessary to examine specific pieces of evidence drawn from collocation analysis. The statistical collocation measures produce results along several relevant dimensions. In the present work, four dimensions of collocability related to the node[2] *hijra* are selected: frequency, exclusivity, connectivity, and dispersion. Some preliminary results of the study are presented below to illustrate these dimensions in turn.

Frequency of use is the basis of collocation analysis. It designates the raw and normalized occurrence of a word within the corpus, which can be presented either as specific or as aggregated results. For example, the word *fī* في occurs 1,589 times in our 40,140-token corpus, and its cases as a collocate *al-hijra fī* الهجرة في (immigration in) have a frequency of 43. Hypothetically, if we intended to compare this frequency result for the chunk *al-hijra fī* with one from another corpus which does not exceed 10,000 tokens, we should *normalize* the collocate frequency by a simple calculation (see Friginal and Hardy 302; Biber 76; McEnery and Hardie 49) as follows: (43/40,140)*10,000, which equals about 10. With this in mind, we can say that the collocate *al-hijra fī* occurs 10 times per 10,000 words. The second dimension relates to exclusivity. Let us consider the collocation *al-hijra fī* again; although this collocate occurs 43 times, the word *fī* is found to occur also after *ar-raghba* الرغبة (desire), *al-Maghrib* المغرب (Morocco), *al-filāḥa* الفلاحة (agriculture), etc., which indicates that the relationship between *hijra* and *fī* is not *exclusive*. On the other hand, the relationship between *hijra* and *ghayr* غير (not/non-) is strong, by at least one of the association measures (AMs), suggesting high exclusivity. In other words, when the word *hijra* is used in the Maghreb media (see Section 3), there is a high probability that the following word is *ghayr*. This can be linked, in turn, to the third dimension, connectivity, that is, how positionally and directionally far from or close to the node (in the collocation window) the collocate is. For instance, the word *min* من (from/in/at/etc.) has a high frequency in the corpus (1,016 as a separate item and 28 as a collocate), it is weakly connected to *hijra*, in that its position in the span is distant from the node. Consider the line below:

> في حين كان في المدينة ميزان **هجرة** سلبي في العشر سنوات **من** بين العشرين.
> *fī ḥīnin kāna fī al-madīnati mīzānu **hijratin** silbīyin fī al-ʿashri sanawātin **min** bayni al-ʿishrīn*
> (While there was a negative migration scale in the city during the ten years out of twenty)

The node *hijra* precedes the collocate *min* by five syntactic positions, which renders its semantic influence questionable. Vaclav Brezina and colleagues note that "collocates ... are part of a complex network of semantic relationships which ultimately reveals their meaning, and the semantic structure of a text or corpus should not be considered in isolation but rather as part of larger collocation networks" (141). Given this, the second-category nodes (see collocation graphs in Section 3), such as *ghayr*, are worth examining. Yet not all the collocates can be evenly distributed across the corpus. The distribution of the node and its collocates can be highlighted in terms of the fourth dimension, dispersion. In collocation analysis, dispersion is

identified by comparing the co-occurrences across the texts of the corpus. For example, the word *min* collocates with *hijra* in approximately 68 out of 85 texts, whereas *ghayr* collocates with it only in 22 texts (though its cases are highly frequent as has just been seen). Therefore, the former collocate is considered to be far more evenly distributed than the latter. In sum, dispersion results enable comparison of the broad position and interests of the producer of language regarding a particular phenomenon.

The paper follows a conventional set of procedures adopted in corpus analysis in general and corpus-assisted collocation analysis in particular. Section 2 synthesizes a concise review of the literature on the *hijra*, with major focus on the linguistic research. Section 3 presents the corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADA) methodology in two main parts, corpus construction and corpus analysis. Section 4 displays and comments on the statistical findings of the study, in accordance with the four dimensions of collocability defined earlier. Section 5 presents a functional interpretation of these findings by establishing reasoned judgments of underlying socio-cultural factors influencing the use of *hijra*. The paper closes with conclusions and directions for future research.

## The *hijra* in Literature

The word hijra in Arabic is derived from the root h-j-r ه ج ر, which means 'to leave,' 'to abandon,' or 'to migrate' (Schacht et al. 828). In most of its uses, it refers to migration or emigration, especially the act of leaving one place to settle in another, be it for social, economic, or religious purposes. Historically, the word carries profound significance within Islamic tradition and refers to the Prophet Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, an event which marked the beginning of the Islamic calendar ("Hijrah"). In its contemporary context, hijra is often used in diversified collocations, therefore serving different meanings at the social, cultural, and political levels.

The intersection of migration and media is worth researching and is, in fact, crucial, as it contributes to a better understanding of how the media shape public discourse, attitudes, and policies surrounding migration (Eberl et al. 207). Research has revealed that media accounts depict migrants through prisms of opportunity, threat, and humanitarian need, which influences societal perceptions and political debates (McCann et al. 2). In essence, investigating this relationship from a corpus-based perspective is pivotal as it allows for the systematic analysis of language patterns, collocations, and discourse structures in large datasets of media texts (Rheindorf and Vollmer 8). This approach reveals frequent and recurring themes, biases, and framing strategies, which results in both quantitative and qualitative insights into how migration is shaped in the media (O'Regan and Riordan 749). By using corpus linguistics, researchers can critically assess the power of media in influencing migration narratives and contribute to more informed, balanced, and ethical reporting (Gemi et al. 266).

The discourse on migration within Arabic media reflects a complex blend of local and global influences. Marco Ammar and Pamela Murgia emphasize how Mediterranean migration narratives in Arabic media are influenced by European political and institutional discourses, while maintaining unique, localized characteristics (Ammar and Murgia 486). This dual nature highlights the tensions between global perceptions and region-specific realities, demonstrating how traditional categories of racism are both reinforced and reinterpreted in an Arab context. Expanding on the theme of changing narratives, Ahmad S. Haider and Saleh S. Olimy examined the shifting depiction of refugees and migrants in Jordan News Agency (PETRA). Their research complements Ammar and Murgia's findings by demonstrating how media narratives shift over time from supporting refugees to highlighting resource scarcity and Europe's

management of the crisis (Haider and Olimy 178). These studies underscore the dynamic role of media in shaping migration discourses and public perceptions, both within and beyond Arab societies.

While Ammar and Murgia focus on media representations, Hussein Elasrag redirects the discussion to the socioeconomic implications of migration, particularly the phenomenon of brain drain in the Arab world (Elasrag 7). By investigating how the migration of skilled professionals influences regional development, Elasrag offers a crucial perspective on the long-term effects of migration that go beyond immediate media narratives. This focus on the relationship between talent migration and regional growth enriches the discussion and connects the representation of migrants to broader structural and economic challenges.

Broadening the discussion of migration's impact on identity and integration, the research on media disengagement among Arab immigrants in Sweden investigates how disengagement from local media echoes profound cultural and social rifts (Al-Musawi and Al-Amiri 173). This research emphasizes the challenges immigrants encounter in maintaining a connection with their host society, while also highlighting the risk of alienation when media narratives do not align with their lived experiences (Al-Musawi and Al-Amiri 173). This viewpoint validates the broader themes addressed by Ammar and Murgia, stressing the media's pivotal role in shaping integration and identity (Ammar and Murgia 503). Finally, an ethnographic study by Alice Elliot provides a deep perspective on migration in Morocco, which challenges the traditional distinctions between migrants and non-migrants. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of those who emigrate and those who prefer to stay, this research widens the migration discourse to include its extensive social and cultural dimensions (Elliot 50). This approach complements Elasrag's macro-level analysis by highlighting the micro-level dynamics that push migration's broader effects, which offers a comprehensive understanding of its complexities. Overall, while all the studies reviewed above contributed to the investigation of the theme of migration in relation to media via different frameworks and using different methods, this research provides a quantitative, data-driven analysis of migration-related language in Arabic media using a corpus-assisted approach, which complements the largely qualitative focus of the existing studies. Unlike prior work, much of it centering on Western media, we explore linguistic patterns in Arabic discourse, which, in turn, will guide our socio-political interpretations.

## Methodology

The CADA method, adopted in the present study, comprises two main phases: Corpus construction and corpus analysis. The corpus design followed a *sample corpus approach*, a construction method that tends to represent a genre of language over a specific time span, capturing a particular snapshot of slow-moving language changes (Hunston 60; McEnery and Hardie 8). The sample of the study is a specialized corpus of written Arabic media. Texts of the corpus are dated between 12 January and 12 November 2024, spanning 10 months.[3] The corpus consists of 40,140 words (Table 1), drawn from six Arabic newspapers located in two main regions, the Maghreb and the Middle East. The Maghreb includes Hespress and Al-Shorouq newspapers, while the Middle East comprises four newspapers from four countries, hence a difference in the size of each component, with the latter exceeding the former by 11,904 words.

**Table 1**

Sources and size of the written Arabic media corpus

| Region | Newspaper | Headquarters | No of texts | No of words |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Maghreb | Hespress | Morocco | 20 | 11,528 |
| | Al-Shorouq | Algeria | 15 | 5,590 |
| The Middle East | Al-Ahram | Egypt | 15 | 3,435 |
| | Al-Jazeera | Qatar | 10 | 8,983 |
| | Akhbar Al-Khaleej | Bahrain | 15 | 4,227 |
| | Al-Quds Al-Arabi | United Kingdom | 10 | 12,377 |
| | Total number | | 85 | 40,140 |

Corpus investigation through collocation analysis can be carried out using various statistical measures. Given our focus on four dimensions of collocability, namely frequency, exclusivity, connectivity, and dispersion (see Section 1), it was appropriate to use three relevant AMs that have proved effective in a number of studies (cf. Alonso et al.; Brezina et al.; Gablasova et al.; Jhang and Lee; McEnery; Williams): Log Dice, MI, and Delta P.

*Log Dice* measures the tendency of two words to co-occur relative to the frequency of these words in the corpus (Evert 30; Smadja 155; Smadja et al. 8). It is a standardized measure operating on a scale with a fixed maximum value of 14; in the case of the present study, the maximum score reaches 11.7 in the whole dataset, and 12.5 on a regional scale. Log Dice can mark an entirely exclusive combination between words in the collocation and enable reliable contrast of dispersive collocates. Moreover, it measures the strength of connectivity, that is, how closely the collocate is associated with the node. MI (Mutual Information) is another AM that assesses the tightness and appropriateness of word combinations (González Fernández and Schmitt 96; Hunston 97; Siyanova and Schmitt 435). Theoretically, the MI score, as a normalized value that is comparable across language corpora, does not operate on a specific min-max scale. Most importantly, the more exclusive and rarer the combination between two words, the larger the score is. In our case, the MI score for all collocates ranges from 3.2 to 9.5. *Delta P*, the last metric to be presented, also quantifies the strength of association between words. Furthermore, it has been suggested as a means of assessing the dispersion and directionality of the collocate (Gries, "Phraseology" 20; "50-something Years" 141); that is, it measures whether a collocate has a tendency to precede or follow the node, hence taking into consideration the symmetries and asymmetries of node-collocate relationships. For appropriate visualization of the statistical findings, *GraphColl*, the Graphical Collocations Tool developed at Lancaster University (Brezina et al.), was employed. The tool presents graphs that illustrate the dimensions of collocability in a clear range of symbols and colors.

## Results

### Frequencies and Association Scores

The term *hijra* occurs 87 times in the corpus, which is the equivalent of 216 per 100,000 words ((87/40,140)*100,000). There are 682 words that co-occur with the node *hijra* in the entire corpus. As seven words were selected in both directions (R7-L7) within the collocation window, 25 out of the 682 qualify as strong collocates given the overall AM scores at hand, with function words included (*min*, *fī*, etc.). They are shown in the figure below.

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| مع | ميزان | أن | على | نحو | غير | إلى | من | في |
| *ma'a* | *mīzān* | *'an* | *ʿalā* | *naḥwa* | *ghayr* | *'ilā* | *min* | *fī* |
| (with) | (scale) | (that) | (on) | (towards) | (not, non-) | (to) | (from) | (in,..) |
| | إسرائيل | التي | حيث | عبر | سرية | محاولة | الشباب | أو |
| | *'isrāʾīl* | *allatī* | *ḥaythu* | *ʿabra* | *sirriya* | *muḥāwala* | *ash-shabāb* | *'aw* |
| | (Israel) | (that) | (where) | (across) | (clandestine) | (an attempt) | (the youth) | (or) |
| | عن | الخارج | سلبي | الأدمغة | لا | جماعية | عملية | الاجتماعي |
| | *ʿan* | *al-khārij* | *silbī* | *al-ʾadmigha* | *lā* | *jamāʿiya* | *'amaliya* | *al-ijtimāʿī* |
| | (on,..) | (abroad) | (negative) | (the brains) | (not) | (collective) | (process) | (social) |

Fig. 1. Collocates of *hijra*

When the AMs are run, the majority of the 25 collocates of *hijra* prove to be meaningful items, while structural words have low values.[4] For example, *mīzān*, *silbī*, and *jamāʿiya* are at the top of the three AMs, respectively (Table 2). In Table 2, Log Dice is adopted as the main classification AM.

**Table 2**

The three AMs scores of the 25 collocates of *hijra*

| Collocate | Log Dice | MI | Delta P |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***mīzān*** | 11.7 | 9.0 | 0.1 |
| ***silbī*** | 11.6 | 9.0 | 0.1 |
| ***jamāʿiya*** | 11.2 | 9.0 | 0.08 |
| ***naḥwa*** | 11.2 | 6.8 | 0.1 |
| ***muḥāwala*** | 11.1 | 7.7 | 0.08 |
| ***ash-shabāb*** | 10.9 | 6.5 | 0.09 |
| ***al-ʾadmigha*** | 10.8 | 9.2 | 0.06 |
| ***al-ijtimāʿī*** | 10.8 | 7.1 | 0.07 |
| ***sirriya*** | 10.8 | 8.5 | 0.06 |
| ***'isrāʾīl*** | 10.6 | 5.9 | 0.09 |
| ***ghayr*** | 10.6 | 5.5 | 0.1 |
| ***al-khārij*** | 10.6 | 7.3 | 0.06 |
| ***ʿabra*** | 10.6 | 6.4 | 0.07 |
| ***'amaliya*** | 10.5 | 6.6 | 0.06 |
| ***'ilā*** | 10.3 | 4.7 | 0.3 |
| ***ḥaythu*** | 10.1 | 5.4 | 0.06 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***ma'a*** | 9.8 | 4.5 | 0.09 |
| ***fī*** | 9.7 | 4.0 | 0.5 |
| ***min*** | 9.7 | 4.0 | 0.3 |
| ***lā*** | 9.3 | 4.1 | 0.05 |
| ***'an*** | 9.3 | 3.8 | 0.1 |
| ***ʿan*** | 9.2 | 3.9 | 0.05 |
| ***'aw*** | 9.1 | 3.8 | 0.05 |
| ***ʿalā*** | 8.9 | 3.2 | 0.1 |
| ***allatī*** | 8.8 | 3.4 | 0.05 |

Yet comparison among the collocates across the three measures can be easily performed, taking into account that the cut-off points range between 8.8 and 11.7 in Log Dice, 3.2 and 9.0 in MI, and 0.05 and 0.5 in Delta P. From a raw-frequency perspective, the minimum occurrence of collocates among the 25 co-occurring hits is five. In the table above, a few collocates are found close to the minimum threshold (i.e., five co-occurrences), including *al-ʾadmigha* and *jamāʿiya*, but their AM scores are high, given their strong values on the dimensions of exclusivity, connectivity, and dispersion. In this regard, the strength of association determines the magnitude of scores. The significance of quantified collocability can be clearly illustrated in graphs, another aspect of the findings to be displayed later.

The dispersion of the collocates is considered across two regional domains of coverage, the Maghreb and the Middle East. Notably, the collocational difference between the Maghrebi (MA.) and Middle Eastern (ME) discursive representation of the *hijra* is statistically fairly apparent. Consider the table below:

**Table 3**
Contrast between the Maghreb and Middle East use of *hijra*

| Collocate | Freq (Corpus) | | Log Dice | | MI | | Delta P | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | MA. | ME | MA. | ME | MA. | ME | MA. | ME |
| ***mīzān*** | - | 11 | - | 12.5 | - | 9.4 | - | 0.2 |
| ***silbī*** | - | 10 | - | 12.4 | - | 9.3 | - | 0.2 |
| ***al-ʾadmigha*** | - | 5 | - | 11.6 | - | 9.5 | - | 0.1 |
| ***'isrāʾīl*** | - | 77 | - | 11.1 | - | 6.2 | - | 0.2 |
| ***ḥaythu*** | - | 38 | - | 10.9 | - | 6.6 | - | 0.1 |
| ***'ilā*** | 213 | 300 | 10.3 | 10.3 | 4.3 | 5.0 | 0.2 | 0.3 |
| ***min*** | 447 | 569 | 8.7 | 10.2 | 2.5 | 4.8 | 0.1 | 0.5 |
| ***ma'a*** | - | 121 | - | 9.9 | - | 4.9 | - | 0.1 |
| ***fī*** | 575 | 1,014 | 9.8 | 9.7 | 3.6 | 4.2 | 0.4 | 0.5 |
| ***ʿalā*** | - | 373 | - | 9.3 | - | 3.9 | - | 0.2 |
| ***jamāʿiya*** | 7 | - | 12.2 | - | 8.7 | - | 0.2 | - |
| ***muḥāwala*** | 14 | - | 12.0 | - | 7.7 | - | 0.2 | - |
| ***naḥwa*** | 35 | - | 11.9 | - | 6.7 | - | 0.2 | - |
| ***sirriya*** | 8 | - | 11.7 | - | 8.0 | - | 0.1 | - |
| ***al-ijtimāʿī*** | 22 | - | 11.6 | - | 6.8 | - | 0.1 | - |
| ***'amaliya*** | 16 | - | 11.5 | - | 7.0 | - | 0.1 | - |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***ʿabra*** | 34 | - | 11.4 | - | 6.2 | - | 0.1 | - |
| ***ash-shabāb*** | 36 | - | 11.3 | - | 6.1 | - | 0.1 | - |
| ***ghayr*** | 72 | - | 11.0 | - | 5.3 | - | 0.2 | - |
| ***ʻan*** | 197 | - | 9.7 | - | 3.7 | - | 0.1 | - |

Since the node is studied within two separate sub-corpora (MA. and ME), the scores of the AMs rise above the cut-off points mentioned earlier; the Log Dice maximum value reaches 12.5, 9.5 in MI, and 0.5 in Delta P, while the minimum values of some items fall below the predictable moderate association scores (hyphenated in Table 3). This indicates that some collocates, such as *mīzān* and *jamāʿiya*, are more significantly associated with the node *hijra* when they are examined from a regional angle.

## Collocation Networks

GraphColl uses four symbols to show the significance of the collocate: edge length, the size of the collocate circle, its color, and positionality (see Figure 2). There are 25 collocates attached to the node (in the middle black circle). Their distance from the node varies; the closer the collocate is to the node, the stronger the association is. This edge length also illustrates the connectivity of the collocates, according to Log Dice and MI scores, in appropriate visualization. It is clear, for example, how strong the relationships between *hijra* and *mīzān*, *naḥwa*, *ash-shabāb*, *al-ʾadmigha*, *sirriya*, and *al-khārij* are. On the other hand, function words are distant from the node. These words, albeit distant, are graphed in large *circles*, which indicates their high frequency in the entire corpus as collocates of the node. The distance and connectivity between the node and the collocates not only determine syntactic roles but also have an important impact on the semantic interpretation of their contextual structures as a whole (see Section 5).

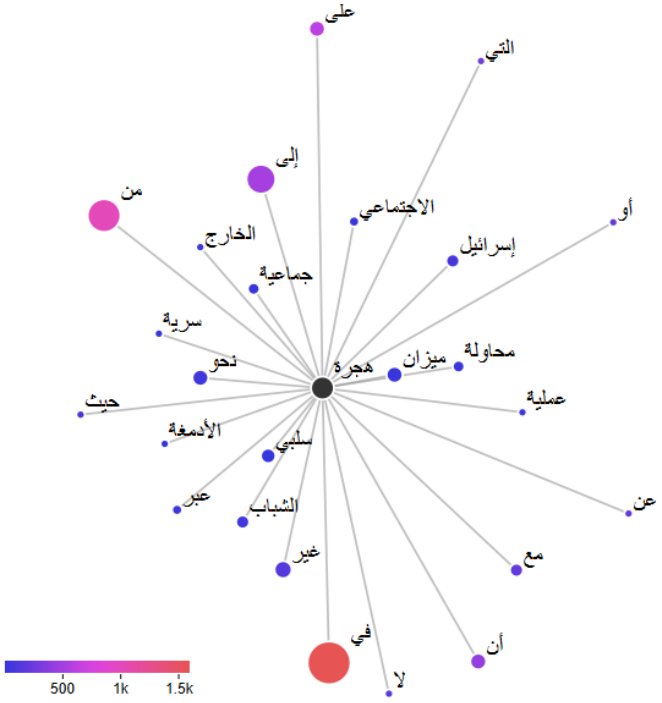



Fig. 2. Graphed 25 collocates of *hijra*

Another variable is the position of the collocate in the graph relative to the node in the center. Items on the right side of the graph are words that occur before the node, while others on the left side occur after the node. How significantly the meanings change due to such positionality is remarkable. For example, the collocate *'amaliya* mostly precedes the node *hijra*, referring to 'an organized *process'*, which is different from '*a practical* immigration' if the collocate followed the node (*hijra 'amaliya* هجرة عملية). In essence, the number of collocates in both directions is highly symmetrical (R12-L13).

Positionality can be extended to confirm our understanding of the context of a collocate. A second-category node analysis is one way of doing that. This technique was employed specifically to elaborate on the collocational network of the two Arabic domains of discourse, the Maghreb and the Middle East; in this vein, it is worth noting that the same principle of analysis adopted for retrieving basic collocates, regarding the collocation window and span, was applied to the second-category node *ghayr*. *ghayr* is a significant collocate of *hijra* in the Maghreb media, having a Log Dice score of 11.0, 5.3 in MI, and 0.2 in Delta P. Consider the elaboration of this collocate in the following graph:

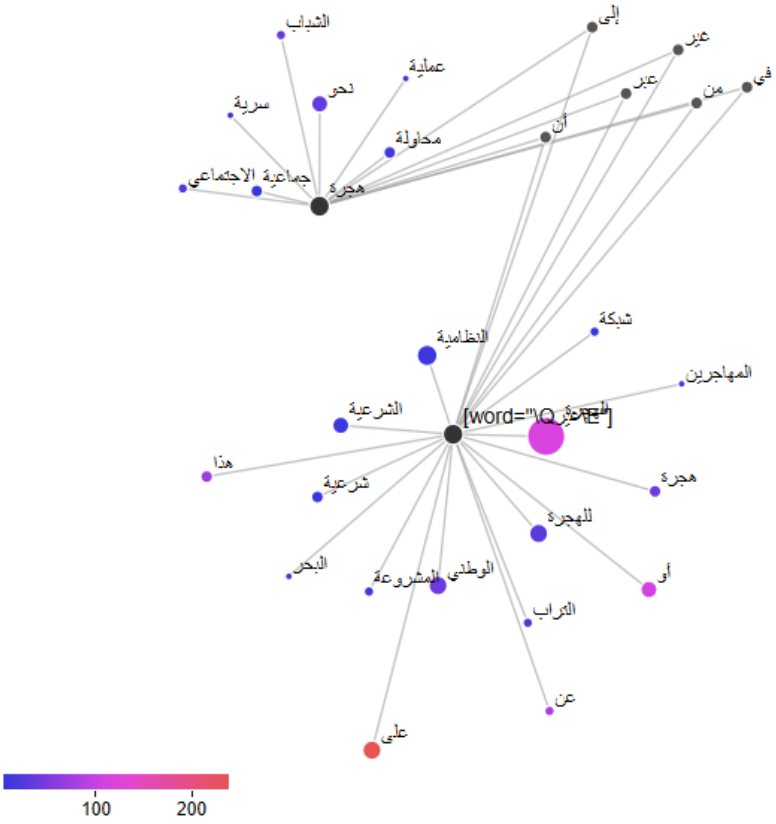



Fig. 3. *ghayr* as a second-category node of hijra (MA)

For the Middle East media, the collocate *min* has a score of 10.2 in Log Dice and 0.5 in Delta P, which are high values. Graphed by GraphColl, *min* is found to be attached to 268 second-category.

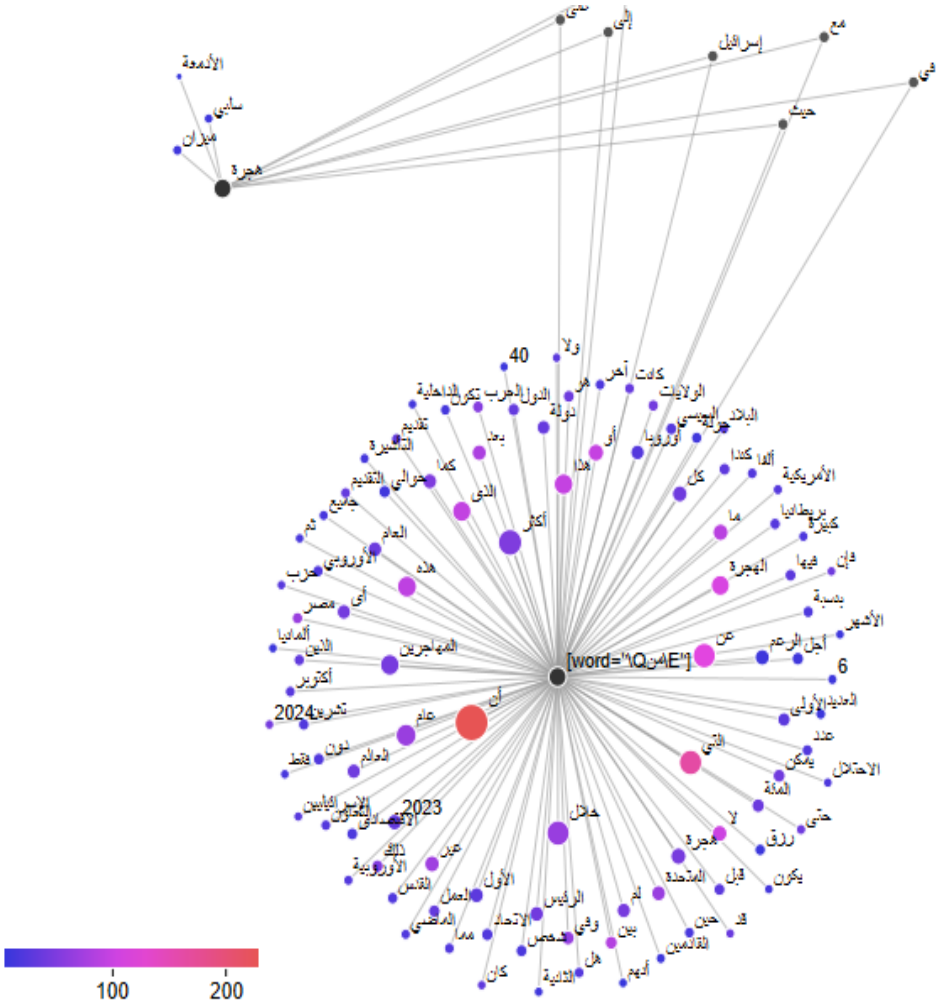



Fig. 4. *min* as a second-category node of hijra (ME)

A number of these collocates are closely related to the *hijra*. Making sense of such relationships, along with interpreting the overall data of collocation analysis, forms the focus of the next section.

## Discussion

The 25 collocates found by the AMs in this study establish an interconnected context of migration in which the process, class, reasons, and destination are addressed. The process of migration, frequently associated with *muḥāwala*, implies a continual set of attempts carried out by immigrants to reach their destination *al-khārij*. *muḥāwala* also implies that migration is an intense, laborious struggle against the barriers to the outside world. In this vein, *ash-shabāb* is the major demographic group targeted in the Arab media coverage. Young people are perceived to be highly sensitive to the social (*ijtimāʿī*) driving factors. In the same way, *ash-shabāb* may constitute a large proportion of *al-ʾadmigha* heading to the north, in the Maghreb case, and to the west, in the general Middle Eastern case. It is further noticeable that the collocates referring to route or arrival points outnumber the collocates referring to departures. *naḥwa*, *ʿabra*, *ḥaythu*, *maʾa*, *ʿalā*, and *ʿilā* are six cases in point; they all reveal that the scale (*mīzān*) of migration is

negative (*silbī*), that is, the number of people who migrate from a particular country is higher than the number who migrate to it. In fact, the overall positive/negative semantic associations are regionally oriented.

Technically speaking, *hijra* in Arabic can be used to refer to irregular migration, but also to regular migration or brain drain. Significantly, the corpus data reveal a surprising dominance of the 'irregular migration' theme in the Maghreb countries. This linguistic focus stands in contrast to the socio-economic reality of brain drain reported in external literature. In Morocco, for instance, reports by De Bel-Air reveal that over 10,000 Moroccan professionals, including doctors, engineers, and researchers, emigrate annually, primarily to Europe and North America (De Bel-Air 3-4). In his article, "The Emigration of Algerian Doctors", Ahcene Zehnati asserts that an estimated 30,000 highly skilled Algerian professionals leave annually (Zehnati 5). A significant proportion are medical practitioners, with around 20% of Algeria's trained doctors working abroad as of 2024 (Zehnati 5). Egypt is not an exception to this trend. Research reveals that a vast majority of junior Egyptian physicians voice their strong desire to emigrate due to systemic job dissatisfaction (Kabbash et al. 1104). In addition to this, research has revealed that tens of thousands of Egyptian doctors are permanently employed across the Gulf countries, especially given the competitive reward packages granted by countries such as Saudi Arabia (Almansour et al. 4). Despite all this, the discourse in the media is mainly centered on irregular migration and is, in essence, predominantly descriptive, lacking a deeper evaluative or analytical layer. This descriptive emphasis is marked by a focus on reporting incidents, 'selected' statistics, and immediate consequences, such as the number of migrants apprehended or tragic accounts of failed migration attempts, without exploring the root causes or broader societal implications. For example, coverage often emphasizes irregular migration routes, detentions, or rescue operations in the Mediterranean, thereby providing a factual report rather than interrogating the socio-economic and political factors behind these movements. Such a surface-level narrative constrains public discourse, offering audiences limited perspectives and failing to encourage critical thinking, systemic reform, or innovative policy solutions.

The media discourse on migration has also been shown to be shaped by the prevailing power structures and institutional priorities. Terms like *muḥāwala*, which implies a 'difficult act,' and *sirriya*, which implies something illegal, mirror a narrative that highlights control, security, and legality, and, most importantly, resonates with governmental perspectives that prioritize national interests over humanitarian concerns. This framing portrays migration as a clandestine or risky endeavor, ignores the socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, or conflict, and sustains stereotypes that stigmatize migrant communities. By intentionally focusing on sensationalized aspects like irregular routes, detentions, or rescue operations, media discourse neglects the human stories, dreams, and push factors behind migration. In fact, a shift from a security-focused discourse to one of empathy and understanding can truly change public perceptions and policy responses and foster more inclusive and equitable approaches to migration governance.

Essentially, the Maghreb media discourse on migration plays a crucial role in transforming revolutionary social energy into narratives that maintain the societal status quo. The tendency of Maghreb media to emphasize "descriptive" and "security-focused" collocates reflects a narrative that resonates with broader institutional priorities rather than an analytical investigation of the phenomenon. Rather than an isolated linguistic pattern, this echoes what Ammar and Murgia describe as the "strong presence" (Ammar and Murgia 486) of European discourse paradigms within Arabic media, which results in the "unconscious replication of Western perspectives" (Ammar and Murgia 6). This convergence with external paradigms obscures local socio-economic complexities and pushes media to embrace a "context-bound

system of representation" (Ammar and Murgia 1) that prioritizes institutional narratives over the lived experiences of migrants. In addition, Gemi et al. observe that such reporting is frequently restricted by "news making routines" and a "fixed repertoire" that prioritizes sensational or negative events, such as "illegal" crossings, given that they possess higher "news value" (Gemi et al. 268). By drawing on these standardized routines, in fact, the Maghreb media discourse inadvertently preserves the societal status quo and shapes *hijra* as a series of manageable security incidents instead of a complex social process that is stimulated by deep-grounded structural issues.

On the other hand, the Gulf media discourse on migration has been shown to be evaluative rather than descriptive, as demonstrated by the analyzed corpus. For instance, the frequent use of terms like *mīzān*, *silbī*, *al-'admigha*, and *'isrā'īl* reflects this evaluative stance, as they reveal a narrative that assesses migration in terms of its consequences on the region's socio-economic and geopolitical contexts. By way of illustration, the word *mīzān* is used to examine migration in terms of equilibrium or imbalance and echoes anxieties about preserving social stability and economic equilibrium in Gulf states heavily dependent on expatriate labor. Likewise, *silbī* carries a judgmental tone and portrays migration or its effects as negative or detrimental, especially when discussing irregular migration or cultural integration difficulties. Also, the term *al-'admigha* underscores a concern with brain drain, particularly when addressing the emigration of highly skilled professionals. The migration of this group is depicted as a setback to national progress. Meanwhile, the references to *isrā'īl* introduce a geopolitical dimension that is used to link migration issues to wider regional tensions or to criticize policies as impacted by foreign powers. This evaluative approach not only represents the region's priorities and concerns but also illustrates how media discourse in the Gulf engages actively with the implications of migration, and, therefore, shapes public perception through a critical and analytical lens rather than straightforward reportage.

## Conclusion

The CADA method applied to the analysis of *hijra* in the Arabic media context arrives at several conclusions. First, the *hijra* designates a complex process, beset by a combination of hardships and oppositional connotations, positive in a particular coverage and negative in another. Second, the oppositional meanings, derived from collocation analysis, challenge the historical Islamic picture associated with *hijra* as a religiously inspired pursuit. In a wider sense, the *hijra* reflects a forced economic-specific alternative to the homeland where possibilities of well-being and happiness are limited. Third, despite apparent cultural homogeneity, the Maghreb and Middle East discourses seem to vary strongly with respect to social phenomena such as the *hijra*. This coverage disparity has been clearly defined in the discussion. The present study provides significant research value, lying in its application of an empirical approach to the study of a discursively debated concept such as *hijra*. This does not negate several limitations of the present work, notably the relatively small size of the corpus and the constrained scope of interpretation it offers. Indeed, the discussion has been developed within the framework of the statistical significance of the node under investigation relative to the overall size of the textual data. In this vein, there is a need for large-scale application of the approach in terms of an expanded dataset, more in-depth discourse analysis, and a broader diachronic corpus, which would enable the monitoring of lexico-semantic shifts within *hijra* discourse over time.

## Notes

1. The transliteration system used throughout this paper is Hans Wehr, with slight modifications related to the following characters: ث *th*, ج *j*, خ *kh*, ذ *dh*, ش *sh*, ظ *ḍh*, and غ *gh*. *t marbūṭa* is chosen as an *–a*, not as *–ah*. Transliterated words are italicized and followed by a gloss.
2. The node is the word we are interested in (i.e., *hijra*). The words that co-occur with it are the *collocates* that exist in a span specified according to researchers' interests, for example five words right (R5) and five words left (L5). This span is called the *collocation window*. How far or close the word is to the node is addressed in the concept of *distance* (see Sinclair et al. 95).
3. Texts were extracted using a simple text-from-file option provided by Microsoft Word. For an effective use of the textual data, the input was refined by deleting supplementary materials such as cover pictures, icons, and hypertexts. It is also worth noting that the corpus was compiled only to answer the research questions, rather than to share it for public or commercial use. In this context, taking content from open-access domains, like newspaper websites, for corpus analysis is deemed an acceptable convention in corpus linguistics (McEnery and Hardie 59).
4. Function words are distinguished from content words based on their role in the collocation window. They are lexico-grammatical units whose semantic interpretation relies on the context in which they exist.

## Works Cited

Almansour, Husam, et al. "Migration of Nurses and Doctors: Pull Factors to Work in Saudi Arabia." *Human Resources for Health*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-023-00809-5.

Al-Musawi, Muhammed J., and Aseel Mahdi Rasheed Al-Amiri. "Media Separation: The Relationship of Arab Immigrants with the Media of the Countries of Diaspora (Sweden as a Model)." *ALBAHITH ALALAMI*, vol. 5, no. 22, 2013, pp. 173-96. https://doi.org/10.33282/abaa.v5i22.312.

Alonso, Araceli, et al. "Collocational Networks and their Application to an E-Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Verbs in Science." *Electronic Lexicography in the 21st Century: New Applications for New Users,* edited by Iztok Kosem et al., Bled, 2011, pp. 12-22.

Ammar, Marco, and Pamela Murgia. "Shaping the Migrant: Semantic Strategies to Portray Inward and Outward Migrants as Social Actors in the Arab Press." *Discourse & Communication*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2022, pp. 485-503, https://doi.org/10.1177/17504813221099192.

Biber, Douglas. *Variation across Speech and Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Brezina, Vaclav, et al. "Collocations in Context: A New Perspective on Collocation Networks." *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2015, pp. 139-73. https://doi.org/10.1075/IJCL.20.2.01BRE.

De Bel-Air, Françoise. *Migration Profile: Morocco*. Migration Policy Center, Policy Briefs, no. 2016/05, Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, 2016, pp. 1-16. *Cadmus EUI*, hdl.handle.net/1814/41124.

Eberl, Jakob-Moritz, et al. "The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its Effects: A Literature Review." *Annals of the International Communication Association*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2018, pp. 207-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2018.1497452.

Elasrag, Hussein. "Migration of Arab Talent." *Munich Personal RePEc Archive*, Sept. 2016. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2846685.

Elliot, Alice. *The Outside: Migration as Life in Morocco*. Indiana University Press, 2021.

Evert, Stefan. "Corpora and Collocations." *Corpus Linguistics: An International Handbook*, edited by Anke Lüdeling and Merja Kytö, de Gruyter, 2008, pp. 223-33. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110213881.2.1212.

Firth, John Rupert. *Papers in Linguistics 1934–1951*. Oxford University Press, 1957.

Friginal, Eric, and Jack A. Hardy. "Conducting Multi-dimensional Analysis Using SPSS." *Multi-dimensional Analysis, 25 Years on: A Tribute to Douglas Biber*, edited by Tony B. Sardinha and Marcia V. Pinto, John Benjamins, 2014, pp. 297-321.

Gablasova, Dana, et al. "Collocations in Corpus-based Language Learning Research: Identifying, Comparing, and Interpreting the Evidence." *Language Learning*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2017, pp. 155-79. https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12225.

Gemi, Eda, et al. "Migrants and Media Newsmaking Practices." *Journalism Practice*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2013, pp. 266-81. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2012.740248.

González Fernández, Beatriz, and Norbert Schmitt. "How Much Collocation Knowledge Do L2 Learners Have? The Effects of Frequency and Amount of Exposure." *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 166, 2015, pp. 94-126. https://doi.org/10.1075/itl.166.1.03fer.

Gries, Stefan Th. "Phraseology and Linguistic Theory: A Brief Survey." *Phraseology: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Sylviane Granger and Fanny Meunier, John Benjamins, 2008, pp. 3-25.

Gries, Stefan Th. "50-something Years of Work on Collocations: What Is or Should Be Next." *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, vol. 18, 2013, pp. 137-66. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.18.1.09gri.

Haider, Ahmad S., and Saleh S. Olimy. "The Representation of Laji'een (Refugees) and Muhajireen (Migrants) in the Headlines of Jordan News Agency (PETRA)." *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue Internationale de Sémiotique Juridique*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2019, pp. 155-86. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-018-9550-4.

Hunston, Susan. *Corpora in Applied Linguistics*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Jhang, Se-Eun, and Sung-Min Lee. "Clusters and Key Clusters in the Maritime English Corpus." *언어과 학*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2013, pp. 199-219. earticle.net/Article/A206411.

Kabbash, Ibrahim, et al. "The Brain Drain: Why Medical Students and Young Physicians Want to Leave Egypt." *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, vol. 27, no. 12, 2021, pp. 1102-08. https://doi.org/10.26719/emhj.21.050.

McCann, Katherine, et al. "The Role of Media Narratives in Shaping Public Opinion toward Refugees: A Comparative Analysis." *Migration Research Series*, no. 72, 2023.

McEnery, Tony. *Swearing in English: Bad Language, Purity and Power from 1586 to the Present*. Routledge, 2006.

McEnery, Tony, and Andrew Hardie. *Corpus Linguistics: Method, Theory, and Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Middle East Eye. "Arabic Press Review: Half of Egypt's Doctors Left Country in Unprecedented Brain Drain." 3 June 2022, middleeasteye.net. Accessed 20 Dec. 2025.

O'Regan, Veronica, and Elaine Riordan. "Comparing the Representation of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants in the Irish and UK Press: A Corpus-Based Critical Discourse

Analysis." *Journal of Language and Politics*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2018, pp. 744-68. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.17043.ore.

Rheindorf, Markus, and Bastian Vollmer. "Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis of Migration-Related Discourses in Media, Politics and Civil Society." *I-CLAIM Project*, Feb. 2025, i-claim.eu. Accessed 22 June 2026.

Schacht, Joseph, et al., editors. "Hidschra." *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 3, 1971, pp. 828-29.

Sinclair, John, et al. *English Collocation Studies: The OSTI Report*. Continuum, 2004.

Siyanova, Anna, and Norbert Schmitt. "L2 Learner Production and Processing of Collocation: A Multi-study Perspective." *Canadian Modern Language Review*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2008, pp. 429-58. https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.64.3.429.

Smadja, Frank. "Retrieving Collocations from Text: Xtract." *Computational Linguistics*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1993, pp. 143-77.

Smadja, Frank, et al. "Translating Collocations for Bilingual Lexicons: A Statistical Approach." *Computational Linguistics*, vol. 22, 1996, pp. 1-38. aclanthology.org/J96-1001/.

Teubert, Wolfgang. "My Version of Corpus Linguistics." *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2005, pp. 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.10.1.01teu.

Tognini-Bonelli, Elena. *Corpus Linguistics at Work*. John Benjamins, 2001.

Wehr, Hans. *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Harrassowitz, 1979.

Williams, Geoffrey. "Collocational Networks: Interlocking Patterns of Lexis in a Corpus of Plant Biology Research Articles." *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1998, pp. 151-71. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.3.1.07wil.

Zehnati, Ahcene. "The Emigration of Algerian Doctors: A Normal Phenomenon or a Real Exodus?" *International Development Policy: Revue Internationale de Politique de Développement*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2021. https://doi.org/10.4000/poldev.4443.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Analysis and Evaluation of the Translation of Qur'anic Terms: *Hajj* as a Case Study

**Omar Ajbar**
Abdelmalek Essadi University, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.9112

**Omar Ajbar** is a Professor of English for Specific Purposes at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Morocco. He holds a PhD in Translation and has more than 22 years of experience in English language teaching and higher education. His research interests include terminology as a field of study, translation studies, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and the integration of artificial intelligence into language teaching and learning.

o.ajbar@uae.ac.ma

https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9484-8757

Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 17-01-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Analysis and Evaluation of the Translation of Qur'anic Terms: *Hajj* as a Case Study

**Omar Ajbar**
Abdelmalek Essadi University, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy

## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the Qur'anic term *Hajj* and assesses its common English equivalent "pilgrimage" through three analytical phases: lexical, conceptual, and contrastive. These phases move from basic lexical meanings to conceptual representations and finally to a comparison with the English equivalent. Classical Arabic lexicons provide the term's lexical foundation prior to its terminologization. Conceptual analysis then delineates the complex concept of *Hajj* through an exegetical analysis based on intratextual, intertextual, and contextual references. This analysis draws upon established sources of Qur'anic exegesis: the *Qur'an*, the *Sunnah*, and the context. The final phase is a contrastive analysis between the conceptually delineated term *Hajj* and its prevalent English equivalent "pilgrimage." The study assesses the degree of equivalence by investigating whether the conceptual representation of the SL term is well reflected in its English equivalent. The paper argues that the conceptual richness of the SL term is not conveyed by the TL term. The findings indicate that "pilgrimage" does not fully capture the conceptual and ritual specificity of *Hajj*, and the paper recommends a foreignization strategy for translating such Qur'anic terms to preserve their distinctive features.

## KEYWORDS

**Qur'an**

**Translation**

***Hajj***

**Pilgrimage**

**Lexical**

**Conceptual**

**Three-dimensional Exegetical Analysis**

**Foreignization**

## Introduction

The Qur'an is not a book for Arabs but a universal message for all humankind. However, there is a linguistic barrier between this universal message and humanity. This linguistic barrier cannot be overcome without translations of good quality. The need for such good quality is more urgent now than before in times when Islam is accused of terrorism and violence based on some translations that have betrayed and distorted the divine message. This betrayal often stems from the failure to adequately capture the conceptual depth of Qur'anic terminology.

The translation of Qur'anic terminology is a complex process that necessitates a rigorous approach and not a simple word-for-word substitution. A high-quality translation of Qur'anic terms cannot be achieved by adopting a literal approach that simply substitutes tokens without conveying the richness of the original message. Free translation is also criticized for introducing biased and subjective interpretations that jeopardize accuracy and authenticity. Thus, it is essential to use translation strategies that approximate Qur'anic terms to the target reader and compensate for any inevitable cultural loss.

Translating Qur'anic terminology involves analyzing not only fundamental lexical meanings but also conceptual representations. Conducting these lexical and conceptual analyses prior to translation is an endeavor of paramount importance because Qur'anic terms are not merely

Contact ✉ o.ajbar@uae.ac.ma
©2026

lexical words but dense concepts of complex religious principles, ritualistic practices, and spiritual values. Reducing the multifaceted conceptual features of Qur'anic terms to simplified lexical definitions risks producing shallow dictionary equivalents that potentially mislead TL readers.

The central hypothesis posits that Qur'anic terms represent concepts whose DFs (distinctive features) extend beyond their original lexical meanings and their typical English equivalents in bilingual dictionaries. According to this hypothesis, the distinctive features of key Qur'anic concepts are frequently lost or inadequately conveyed in existing English translations, particularly when translators rely heavily on lexical equivalents provided by bilingual dictionaries, whose equivalents lack the conceptual depth of the source terms, leading to oversimplifications or even misinterpretations. Relying solely on a dictionary's lexical meanings can lead to mistranslations and a loss of conceptual richness. Mistranslation becomes evident when translators depend on superficial lexical meanings that fail to encapsulate the conceptual richness of Qur'anic terms.

The assumption is that the distinctive features of Qur'anic concepts and their English equivalents are frequently divergent, and these discrepancies contribute to significant mistranslations. This paper addresses this challenge by investigating the Qur'anic term *Hajj* and its common English equivalent, "pilgrimage." The central thesis is that the term *Hajj* conveys a complex concept that is not fully captured by the English term "pilgrimage." The concept of *Hajj* conveys a complex conceptual network of rituals, practices, physical movements, recitations, and spiritualities that extend far beyond the basic denotative meanings transmitted by its prevailing equivalent "pilgrimage." The study presumes that the English equivalent, with its own religious and cultural associations, fails to convey the conceptual richness of the source term, leading to its diminishment and misinterpretation. The research will test this hypothesis through a tripartite analytical approach that combines lexical, conceptual, and contrastive analyses.

The study is guided by interrelated key questions. Firstly, what are the lexical meanings of *Hajj* as identified by authoritative Arabic lexicographic sources, and what are the main essential and complementary DFs of *Hajj* as revealed through intratextual, intertextual, and contextual sources? Secondly, what are the lexical origins and the conceptual representations of the English equivalent "pilgrimage" and to what extent does it encapsulate *Hajj*'s DFs? And thirdly, what is the translation strategy that can more effectively retain the conceptual richness of *Hajj* and avoid potential areas of conceptual loss?

## Literature Review

The translation of religious terminology, particularly from the *Qur'an*, presents a complex challenge that goes beyond a simple transfer of lexical meaning. Scholars in the fields of terminology and translation studies emphasize that these terms are not mere words but are units of specialized knowledge embedded within intricate conceptual systems. They should be approached differently from general language words. As such, their translation requires a meticulous approach that delves beneath the surface level to grasp their full conceptual depth.

The study of terminology has long provided a framework for understanding the challenges of translating terms. Cabré defines a term as "a unit with similar linguistic characteristics used in a special domain. From this standpoint, a word of a special subject field would be a term" (35). Sager adds that terms denote concepts that are delineated and conveyed within broader conceptual dimensions (57). According to Sager, "Terms can, of course, only be used as such if the user already possesses the configuration of knowledge which determines the role of the term in a structured system" (20). This means that a term is not just a word with a definition; it is

embedded within a network of related concepts that give it meaning. For a term to function effectively, the person using it must understand not only its definition but also its relationships with other terms within the same system. Without this contextual knowledge, the term's meaning can be misunderstood or reduced to a simplistic, isolated interpretation.

The concept that a term designates is exclusively related to a specific subject field. According to Cabré, "terminology only focuses on the words belonging to either a specific field (such as physics, chemistry, anthropology or drawing) or to a professional activity (such as business, industry, sports, etc.)" (35). This means that the meaning of a term is highly specialized and cannot be fully understood outside the context of its specific domain. For instance, the term *Zakat* in Islamic studies does not simply translate to "charity" as in everyday language but rather conveys a precise religious obligation with defined conditions, calculated amounts, and spiritual significance. As such, when translating terms from one language to another, particularly in specialized fields like religion, it is crucial to consider its deeper and context-bound concept rather than relying solely on general lexical equivalents.

Textual terminology maintains that the concept of a term is delineated by its position in a textual context. A term is mainly defined by its textual context. Thus, a Qur'anic term should not be delineated in isolation but based on its textual context. Abdel Haleem argues that both textual context (siyāq al-naṣṣ) and situational/rhetorical context (siyāq al-mawqif or maqām) are tools to explain and clarify Qur'anic terms ("Role of Context" 47). Analyzing the textual context entails examining its intratextuality, including its surrounding words, phrases, sentences, and even larger textual units such as paragraphs or chapters. It also requires considering its intertextuality, which encompasses related texts that shed further light on the term's meaning, usage, and discursive function. Textual analysis is a systematic procedure that seeks to accurately identify and interpret a term's contextual meaning by examining both its intratextual positioning and its intertextual associations. Abdel Haleem concludes that "in interpreting the Qur'an and translating it into another language, context is a vital consideration" ("Role of Context" 62). This recognition "was recognized and formulated for the study of the text of the Qur'an by Muslim linguists whose work in this respect anticipated by many centuries modern linguistic thinking" (Abdel Haleem, *Understanding* 158). Translators who overlook the essential role that the textual context plays in understanding the Qur'an misinterpret and mistranslate its terms.

In translation studies, the primary concern has been the conveyance of meaning from one language to another. For many years, scholars of translation have asked a question that is simple in form but profound in scope: how can meaning truly pass from one language into another? In the 1960s and 1970s, much of the theoretical discussion was about the concept of equivalence. Catford gave one of the earliest definitions of translation when he described translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)" (20). His definition mirrors the mindset of the linguistic era, when translation was mainly studied as a system of formal correspondences. Within this paradigm, equivalence is treated as a largely technical procedure, suggesting that meaning could be transferred through systematic substitution at the levels of grammar and lexis. However, language is not a mechanical grid of interchangeable signs. It lives through culture, context, and intention—elements that no linguistic formula can perfectly replicate.

The American linguist and Bible translator Nida shifts attention toward the reader and the effect of the message. He distinguishes between formal and dynamic equivalence, arguing that "in such a translation one is not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source-language message, but with the dynamic relationship" (159). For Nida, translation is not simply a matter of matching words, but it has to recreate the impact the original

text produced. Working with Taber, he defines translation as "reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style" (Nida and Taber 12). This approach gives translators greater interpretive responsibility; faithfulness still matters, but meaning and reader response take precedence over rigid form.

Newmark balances two competing approaches, semantic translation and communicative translation. Newmark argues that "There is no one communicative nor one semantic method of translating a text — these are in fact widely overlapping bands of methods" (40). At times, it is necessary to remain close to the original in order to preserve subtle shades of meaning; at others, the translator must adjust the text to make it clear and natural for the reader. According to Newmark, "Communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original" (39).

Venuti highlights the ethical and cultural dimensions of translation. He maintains that "the more transparent the translation, the more invisible the translator" (Venuti 2). Venuti argues that pursuing fluency erases the translator's presence and domesticates the foreign text. The target text-centered translation is an ethnocentric translation that reduces the foreign text to make it fit the culture of the target reader. The smoother a translation reads, the easier it becomes for the reader to forget that it is a translation at all, and the cultural "otherness" of the original is quietly lost (Venuti 20).

Several empirical studies have noted that domestication often runs into problems when sacred or ritualized terms are involved. Noviyenty et al., for instance, show that domestication of Qur'anic cultural items risks stripping away precisely those associations that make the terms meaningful to a Muslim readership (884). Venuti maintains that foreignization retains the linguistic and cultural features of the source text for a foreign reading experience (20). Much of recent theoretical discussion on translating Qur'anic terms still draws on Venuti's distinction between domestication and foreignization.

This point is particularly evident in the case of *Hajj*. Rendering *Hajj* simply as "pilgrimage" arguably smooths the text for non-Muslim readers, but it also reduces a specific term into a generic English word. Recent contributions—Ajbar among them—stress that this sort of flattening is misleading (67–74). Studies that have analyzed translations in practice confirm that some degree of foreignization, often through transliteration accompanied by explanation, provides a more reliable means of preserving meaning (Ghorianfar et al. 147–163). *Hajj* is an illustrative example here; its treatment reflects the broader shift from readability at all costs towards a concern with precision and the translator's responsibility as a cultural mediator.

These theories chart the evolution of translation studies. While Catford prioritizes linguistic structure, Nida and Taber focus on meaning and reader response, Newmark calls for a sense of professional balance between semantic translation and communicative translation, and Venuti exposes the hidden cultural and ethical stakes. Translation is no longer a mechanical substitution of words but a dialogue between languages, cultures, and values. The path from form to culture thus reveals translation as an act of human judgment, one that requires sensitivity, awareness, and respect for difference.

## Methodology

The present study adopts a three-phase analytical methodology—lexical, conceptual, and contrastive—each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the source term and its English equivalent. The analytical model followed in this study—moving from the lexical to the conceptual and then to the contrastive—sits naturally alongside Nida's account of dynamic

equivalence. Nida's well-known insistence is that translation should not be judged primarily by its closeness to form, but by the extent to which it enables the new audience to engage with the message as the first audience once did. According to Nida, "The relationship between the receptor and the message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message" (159).

Examining lexical meanings, conceptual characteristics, and functional contrasts reflects Nida's principle that translation must reproduce the equivalent effect rather than the literal form. The lexical stage deals with the immediate semantic value of the term; the conceptual stage uncovers the distinctive features that sustain it; and the contrastive stage measures the adequacy of the English rendering against those deeper layers. What matters, then, is not simply the presence of a word-for-word equivalent, but whether the translation carries over the distinctive features (DFs) that make the term meaningful within its original context.

Nida's principle of dynamic equivalence is relevant for the kind of analysis undertaken here. In this light, the three-phase model—lexical, conceptual, and contrastive—can be seen as a practical means of testing Nida's model of dynamic equivalence. Nida asks whether the target reader experiences something similar to the source reader. If we apply that principle here, the answer is awkward: "pilgrimage" may generate recognition for English readers, but the recognition it produces is of a voluntary, often touristic practice. It is not the same recognition that the source audience has.

Skopos theory, though formulated from a different angle, adds a complementary perspective. For Vermeer, translation decisions are governed not by fidelity to linguistic form but by the purpose (Skopos) that the translation is intended to fulfill in its target setting. As Vermeer explains, here in Nord's translation, "each text is produced for a given purpose and should serve this purpose…the translation must function in the situation in which it is used and for the people who will use it" (Vermeer, trans. in Nord 29). According to this theory, translation is guided by purpose and assessed in relation to the role it is expected to play in the target culture. Everything depends on the purpose the translation is meant to serve. If the aim is to present the *Qur'an* to a general readership with minimal cultural background, then "pilgrimage" might be defensible. However, when the purpose is exegetical or pedagogical within Islamic studies, the only responsible choice is to preserve the term *Hajj* and explain it, even at the cost of slowing down the reading. These are not trivial choices, and they illustrate how Skopos theory prioritizes function over form.

The methodology developed here considers both concerns. It does not claim to resolve the longstanding tension between equivalence and functionalism, but it does suggest that they can be brought into a productive dialogue. In this sense, the three-phase approach aims to replicate the experience of the source text reader and to achieve the communicative purpose the translation is meant to fulfill. This theoretical grounding provides the basis for the following analyses.

## Lexical Analysis

Classical authoritative Arabic lexicographic sources are used to identify the core lexical semes that constitute the term's foundation before its religious terminologization that builds upon the dictionary's meaning and endows it with precise conceptual DFs so that the general word becomes a technical term with defined characteristics. A meticulous lexical analysis lays the foundation for deeper conceptual analysis that identifies the DFs of the term. The study tracks the term's journey from its lexical meanings in the general vocabulary to a specific term within a specific field.

## Conceptual Analysis

Building upon the lexical groundwork, the conceptual analysis delineates the conceptual representation of the term *Hajj* through a tridimensional exegetical model, examining intratextual (the Qur'an), intertextual (the Sunnah), and contextual (historical and socio-cultural milieu) references. "Pilgrimage" will also be conceptually analyzed based on its Christian associations and current usage. According to Sager, "A concept represents the mental image associated with a term, and in specialized translation, grasping this image is essential to accurate rendering" (57). The tridimensional exegetical model aims to delineate the DFs that the concept of *Hajj* encapsulates within the Qur'anic terminology.

The intratextual, intertextual, and contextual references on which this model is based have long been used by the discipline of exegesis, the main purpose of which is to clarify the meanings of the Qur'an. Abdul-Raof defines Qur'anic exegesis as "a literary activity whose function is the elucidation of the clear and ambiguous aspects of the Scripture and its major principles" (iv). The intra-textual approach is the most authentic source for clarifying the Qur'an. Qur'anic exegesis also relies on the intertextual sources of the Sunnah to explain the Qur'an. The heavy reliance on this intertextual approach is justified by the complementarity between the two main sources of Sharia, namely the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The contextual approach provides important historical, cultural, and social information that informs the revelation of the Qur'an.

Intra-textuality is a network of ideational (conceptual), interpersonal, and textual relationships that bind the different parts of a text into a well-connected and unified whole, thus ensuring thematic and structural continuity. Sharrock states that "Intratextuality is the phenomenon and the study of the relationship between elements within texts" (15). Thanks to these relationships that combine what seems scattered and form a sophisticated, meaningful unity, the gaps in meaning are filled, and the ambiguities are clarified. Sharrock mentions that "intratextuality's interest includes the question of how disparate parts of texts fit together, and how the presence of an element in one part of the text may make itself felt in the realization of a far-distant place" (23). Intra-textuality is achieved through the interdependence between normally fragmented textual elements that form an interconnected text. An intratextual analysis of a Qur'anic term prioritizes the internal coherence of the Qur'anic text, utilizing cross-references and thematic linkages within the Qur'an itself to elucidate and specify its meanings. A Qur'anic term is clarified by reference to the Qur'an itself. An elucidating verse details what is presented concisely, clarifies what is ambiguous, specifies what is general, or restricts what is unrestricted. This approach is widely regarded as the most authentic exegetical method, as it draws directly from the Qur'anic corpus to resolve ambiguities, clarify generalities, and elaborate on concise expressions.

A text depends on other texts to convey its meaning. This meaning is synthesized by the network of intertextual relations to which it refers. The reader's knowledge of this network and its intertexts is essential for conveying meaning. Linde notes that reading "becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations" (169). Hence, a single text cannot be understood in isolation from its interrelated texts. Aichele and Philips state that "texts acquire meaning to the extent that they are situated in relation to other texts in a web of mutual interference and illumination" (11).

The meaning of a text is shaped by the textual network it maintains with previous and subsequent texts, and the translator must refer to this network to form a comprehensive understanding of the text's meanings. The *Sunnah* comprises thousands of intertexts, the sayings, deeds, and testimonies of the Prophet. The delimitation of a *Qur'anic* concept is also

determined by its non-verbal context. Levinson states that "context is understood to cover the identities of participants, the temporal and spatial parameters of the speech event, and the beliefs, knowledge and intentions of the participants in that speech event, and no doubt much besides" (5). It is necessary to situate the *Qur'an* within the context of its revelation. In the present paper, the identification of contextual elements contributes to the delimitation of Qur'anic concepts, drawing upon the defining contexts in which they are described.

## Contrastive Analysis

The final phase juxtaposes the concept of *Hajj* against its prevalent English equivalent, "pilgrimage." The objective is to assess whether "pilgrimage" is lexically and conceptually equivalent to the Qur'anic term. This analysis examines the hypotheses that "pilgrimage" cannot convey the rich DFs of the original term, and that lexical substitution and conceptual domestication are inadequate strategies for translating Qur'anic terms. The findings of this three-phase assessment will inform a translation strategy that maintains the DFs of the concept of *Hajj*.

## Results and Discussion

*Hajj* is the fifth of the five mandatory pillars of Islam. Muslims with the physical and financial capacity are required to complete it once in their lifetime. It is considered a particularly meritorious worship and a moment of intense devotion. The concept of *Hajj* is analyzed, and its DFs are identified after briefly introducing its lexical meanings. Then, its equivalent "pilgrimage" is conceptually analyzed, and its DFs will be contrasted with those of *Hajj*.

### Lexical Analysis

Major lexicographical sources define *Hajj* as a purposeful and intentional visit, typically to a significant place or person. They emphasize its foundational meanings that revolve around intention, aim, purpose, destination, determination, and deliberate pursuit. For instance, al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ describes *Hajj* as a determined visit to a place or a person (al-Fīrūzābādī 294); al-Muʿjam al-Wasīṭ adds meanings of destination, intention, and arrival (Majmaʿ al-Lughah al-ʿArabīyah 178). Lisān al-ʿArab refers to *Hajj* as a visit that encompasses notions of intention and purpose (Ibn Manẓūr 2: 56–59). Mukhtār al-Ṣiḥāḥ converges on the semantic nucleus of intention, purpose, and determined visit (al-Rāzī 64). Thus, *Hajj* in its lexical sense is not an ordinary visit, but one distinguished by the meanings of intention, purpose, determination, deliberation, and straightforwardness. The same lexicons highlight the meanings of repetition, frequency, and recurrence associated with determined, purposeful, and intentional visits. The lexical sources also refer to the meanings of evidence, reason, and argument.

This dual emphasis on intention and repetition is relevant to the Qur'anic term *Hajj*. The last pillar of Islam involves a profoundly determined recurring visit that generations have practiced for centuries. Moreover, the meanings of evidence and argument are also related to the term *Hajj* as a historical, purposeful testimony that millions of pilgrims bear annually.

There is no rupture between the concept of *Hajj* as the fifth pillar of Islam and its lexical meanings. The Qur'anic term retains the meanings of visit, intention, determination, repetition, recurrence, and evidence while acquiring additional meanings within the Qur'anic discourse. There is a harmony between the first literal denotative senses of the word and the

terminologically acquired meanings derived from intratextual, intertextual, and contextual sources.

## Conceptual Analysis

The lexical meanings form the core on which the terminological usage is built. The word *Hajj* has retained its lexical polysemy but has also undergone a process of terminologization to denote a specialized concept in Islam. The *Qur'anic* term *Hajj* denotes a concept whose distinctive meanings go beyond the original lexical meanings. For instance, *al-Iḥrām*, a defining conceptual feature of *Hajj,* involves having the intention to perform this act of worship and proclaiming this intention in the form of a declaration that emphasizes sincerity and devotion. Depending totally on dictionaries to understand and translate the term would produce inadequate translations.

The process of terminologization transforms *Hajj* from a general act of visiting into a specific religious obligation, defined by a set of rituals and spiritual states. Based on intra-textual, inter-textual, and contextual references, Islamic jurists describe *Hajj* as entering the state of *al-Iḥrām*, standing on *ʿArafah* on the 9th of *Dhū al-Ḥijjah*, circumambulating al-Kaʿbah, and walking between the hills of *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwah*. These acts, underpinned by the intention to fulfill a divine command, constitute the main conceptual features of *Hajj*.

## Intratextual Analysis

The Qur'an identifies the term's core DFs in several surahs, including al-Baqarah, Āl ʿImrān, al-Mā'idah, al-Tawbah, and most notably, al-Ḥajj—the sole surah named after a pillar of Islam, thereby highlighting the significance of the concept. Given the constraints of space, only representative intratextual references that delimit the concept of *Hajj* are presented. The verses "Pilgrimage to this House is an obligation by Allah upon whoever is able among the people […]" (Qur'an 3:97) and "Call ˹all˺ people to the pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on every lean camel from every distant path," (Qur'an 22:27) are among these examples. The two verses enshrine several conceptual features: *Hajj*'s mandatory status, divine ordinance, the condition of ability, and its function as a symbol of transnational Muslim unity.

Ibn Kathīr (1: 369) affirms that the verse (*Qur'an* 3:97) asserts both the obligation of *Hajj* and the limiting condition of ability. Performing *Hajj*is an obligation only if the financial and physical condition is fulfilled. Muslims who are incapable of meeting this condition are exempted. Several other exegetical authorities, such as al-Qurṭubī and al-Ṭabarī, maintain that a potential pilgrim must guarantee sufficient resources to finance his "pilgrimage" and provide for his dependents during his absence.

A Muslim assumes the state of *al-Iḥrām* to declare that his *Hajj* is devoted only to Allah. *Hajj* is exclusively devoted to Allah: "Complete the pilgrimage and minor pilgrimage for Allah" (*Qur'an* 2:196). According to al-Alūsī, this verse calls for devoting *Hajj* to Allah and intending to perform it for Him (180). According to al-Ṭabarī, the performer of *Hajj* pledges to adhere to specific timings and strict rules and regulations when he intentionally commits himself to the state of *al-Iḥrām* (540).

*Hajj* involves a sequence of rituals that include walking between *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwah* and standing on *ʿArafāt*. One significant rite is walking between the hills of *Al-Ṣafā* and *Al-Marwah*. This ritual is mentioned in the verse "Indeed, ˹the hills of˺ *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwah* are among the symbols of Allah. So, whoever makes the major or minor pilgrimage to the ˹Sacred˺ House, let them walk between ˹the two hills˺" (*Qur'an* 2:158). Although this verse does not refer to this rite as an obligation, Ibn Kathīr (1: 469) confirms that walking between the two hills is

mandatory. The revelation of this verse emphasizes that Muslims should not hesitate to perform this pre-Islamic rite (Ibn Kathīr 1: 470).

Standing on the plains of *ʿArafāt* is the most essential ritual of *Hajj*. The verse "When you return from *ʿArafāt*, praise Allah near the sacred place" (*Qur'an* 2:198) tacitly implies its centrality. Ibn Kathīr (1: 193) and others contextualize the act within the broader temporal structure of *Hajj*, explaining its link to the subsequent overnight stay in *Muzdalifah*. The omission of the *Muzdalifah* stay, although discouraged, can be expiated through a sacrificial offering. Another rite supported by intratextual reference is the circumambulation of al-Ka'bah, articulated in the verse "circle the Ancient House" (*Qur'an* 22:29). Jurists such as al-Baghawi affirm the obligatoriness of this ritual, without which *Hajj* is invalid (1: 381).

Temporal demarcation is a further defining feature of this concept. The rituals of *Hajj* are performed in a well-defined period. The verse "They ask you ˹O Prophet˺ about the phases of the moon. Say, They are a means for people to determine time and pilgrimage" establishes that *Hajj* is to be performed within a set of known lunar months (*Qur'an* 2:189). The verse "Commitment to pilgrimage is made in appointed months" confirms that *Hajj* should be during these prescribed months (*Qur'an* 2:197). Ibn Kathīr (1: 543–544) elaborates on the temporal and moral restraints imposed during these months, including abstinence from sexual intercourse, sinful behavior, and disputation.

Complementary rituals, including shaving or trimming the hair, stoning al-Jamrāt, and staying overnight in *Miná*, are intratextually supported. The verse (*Qur'an* 2:196) advises against shaving until the sacrificial act has been completed, a practice described as obligatory but expiable if omitted under necessity (al-Baghawī 222). Similarly, the verse (*Qur'an* 2:203) references the ritual acts to be undertaken during the "appointed days," interpreted as the 11th to 13th of Dhū al-Ḥijjah, during which *al-Jamārāt* ritual and collective remembrance of Allah are observed. These intra-textual references are the foundational sources for delineating the concept of *Hajj*. They delineate the conceptual representation of *Hajj* through a collection of essential and complementary DFs, which are synthesized in Table 1.

**Table 1**
Intratextual-Based Distinctive Features

| Essential Distinctive Features | Complementary Distinctive Features |
|---|---|
| Obligatoriness contingent on *istitaʿah* (ability) | Overnight stay in Muzdalifah |
| Exclusive devotion to Allah | Stoning of al-Jamārāt |
| Structural sequencing of rituals (e.g., *Iḥrām*, *Ṭawāf*, *Saʿy*, *ʿArafāt*) | Shaving or trimming hair |
| Strict procedural norms | Prohibition of sexual activity and argumentation |
| Prescribed lunar months | Maintenance of ritual purity and avoidance of prohibited acts |

## Intertextual Analysis

The DFs identified in the *Qur'an* are emphasized and further specified by the *Sunnah* that elucidates the concept of *Hajj* and delineates its distinct characteristics. The *Sunnah* includes hundreds of intertextual references that delineate the DFs of *Hajj*. While the *Sunnah* comprises a vast number of intertextual references detailing the DFs of *Hajj*, this analysis will present examples to illustrate the substantive role of intertextuality in defining Qur'anic concepts.

The mandatory nature of *Hajj* is a primary essential DF emphasized by many intertexts that reconfirm that it must be performed once in a lifetime. In one of these inter-texts, the Prophet calls believers to perform *Hajj* after it has been made obligatory by the *Qur'an* (Muslim 1337). The Prophet mentions that there is no difference between a Jew or a Christian and a Muslim who has the financial means and refuses to perform *Hajj* (Tirmidhī 150). While the Qur'anic intratext establishes the obligation, it does not specify how often a Muslim has to perform *Hajj*; the *Sunnah* asserts that *Hajj* is obligatory only once. When asked if it is required yearly, the Prophet says it is mandatory only once (Ibn Mājah 2886).

Several Hadiths mention the merits of performing *Hajj*. The Sunnah extensively details the spiritual rewards associated with performing *Hajj*, identifying paradise as the ultimate recompense. *Hajj* is ranked as the third-most virtuous act of worship (al-Bukhārī 1519). It is also considered the best form of jihad (al-Bukhārī 1861) and recognized as a means to alleviate poverty (Tirmidhī 151). In another hadith, the Prophet points out that paradise is certainly offered to any Muslim whose *Hajj* is approved by Allah (al-Bukhārī 1773).

*Hajj* is a multi-phase process of rites that starts with al-Iḥrām and concludes with the farewell al-Ṭawāf. The Sunnah clarifies the essential conceptual feature of al-Iḥrām with details related to the designated geographical starting points of al-Iḥrām (Abu Dawud 1737). The other details concern the rituals of purification, wearing the two-piece unstitched garment, and reciting al-Talbiyah, the specific invocation for *Hajj* (Muslim 1184a). The Sunnah also distinguishes between three types: *Hajj* only, *Hajj* and Umrah with one al-Iḥrām, and Umrah and *Hajj* with a break from al-Iḥrām (al-Bukhārī 1561).

The validity of *Hajj* is dependent upon fulfilling specific conditions that are further specified in the *Sunnah*, such as *Saʿy* (walking between *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwah*) and staying in *Mina*. Numerous inter-textual references confirm the indispensability of *Saʿy*. A well-known *Hadith* establishes it as an obligatory rite that cannot be omitted (al-Bukhārī 1643), and another tradition explains exactly how to perform it (al-Bukhārī 1644). Moreover, the *Sunnah* refers to the essential practice of staying in *Mina* on the 8th day of Dhu al-Hijjah before proceeding to *ʿArafāt* (Ibn Mājah 3004). The Prophet also reconfirms the centrality of standing at *ʿArafāt* as an uncompensated pillar whose absence invalidates the whole *Hajj* (al-Nasāʾī 3016). Intertexts also highlight the immense redemptive significance of the Day of *ʿArafāt*, stating it is the day Allah frees the most servants from Hellfire (Muslim 1348).

*Al-Ṭawāf* Ifada, the circumambulation of *al-Kaʿbah*, is another essential feature whose indispensability is reconfirmed by the *Sunnah* (al-Bukhārī 328). Further intertextual references clarify this pillar of *Hajj* with complementary features, such as the permission to perform it without mandated physical segregation between women and men (al-Bukhārī 1618). Stoning the pillars is also an essential feature mentioned in more detail in the *Sunnah* (al-Bukhārī 1752). In addition to delineating the concept with essential DFs, the intertextual sources of the *Sunnah* introduce and modify the concept with complementary DFs, such as proxies and concessions.

The Prophet grants the possibility of performing *Hajj* on behalf of one's parents. The Prophet approves of this possibility when asked by a companion if it is possible to perform *Hajj* on behalf of his old and sick father (Ibn Mājah 2906). The *Sunnah* also allows concessions,

permitting sick pilgrims to use conveyances (ride) (Ibn Mājah 2961) and allowing menstruating women to perform all *Hajj* rites except *al-Ṭawāf* around *al-Kaʿbah* (Ibn Mājah 2963).

*Al-Iḥrām*, clothing restrictions, *Talbiyah* recitation, pebble size, and hair removal are examples of other complementary features introduced by intertextual references. The *Sunnah* specifies the items of clothing to be avoided in the state of *al-Iḥrām*. The Prophet lists prohibited items of clothing during *al-Iḥrām*, including sewn garments, turbans, caps, stockings, and fabrics treated with specific substances (Muslim 1177b). The *Sunnah* asserts that *Talbiyah* should be recited throughout the period of *Hajj* until the pillar of al-ʻAqabah is stoned (Ibn Mājah 3040). It also specifies the size of the pebbles to be thrown (Ibn Mājah 3028) and gives preference to shaving the head over trimming (Ibn Mājah 3043). In summary, the different intertextual references reconfirm the essential DFs and further delineate the concept by elaborating on its procedural intricacies, conditions, permissible modifications, and profound religious significance (Table 2).

**Table 2**

Intertextual-Based Distinctive Features

| **Essential Distinctive Features** | **Complementary Distinctive Features** |
|---|---|
| Mandatory, once-in-a-lifetime duty contingent on ability. | Permissibility of performing *Hajj* by proxy for eligible parents. |
| Rewarded with Paradise. | Specific clothing restrictions during al-Iḥrām. |
| A detailed, multi-phase ritual process (e.g., *Iḥrām*, *ʿArafah*, *Ṭawāf*, *Saʿy*, and Ramy). | Loud recitation of Talbiyah. |
| Requires specific conditions for validity, including rites detailed primarily in the Sunnah (e.g., *Saʿy*). | Specified size for pebbles used in Ramy. |
| | Preference for shaving the head over trimming. |
| | Concessions for the sick and menstruating women. |

## Contextual Analysis

This section examines DFs of the concept of *Hajj* derived from its broader historical, socio-cultural, and geographical context. This contextual dimension is integral to a comprehensive conceptual analysis, supplementing the intratextual and intertextual dimensions.

*Hajj* is a pre-Islamic worship dating back to the Ibrahimic era. *Hajj* and its rites were first performed by the Prophet Ibrahim, who was ordered to build al-Ka'bah, the House of Allah, with the help of his son Ismail. The *Qur'an* describes the construction of al-Ka'bah in the verse "And ˹remember˺ when Abraham raised the foundation of the House with Ishmael, ˹both˺ praying, "Our Lord! Accept ˹this˺ from us. You are indeed the All-Hearing, All-Knowing" (*Qur'an* 2:127).

Many of the rites of *Hajj* are not explicitly mentioned in the *Qur'an* as they were already known and performed in the pre-Islamic era. The Arabs inherited performing these rites from their father Ibrahim. For example, Hedayetullah mentions that "Islam has adopted another pre-Islamic pilgrimage ritual-the halt (Wuquf) in the field of 'Arafah. […] Further, in the pre-Islamic pilgrimage, there was the custom of maintaining the state of *al-Iḥrām*" (78). Hedayetullah points to other rituals of *Hajj* whose origins are traced to the pre-Islamic era (78–83). These rituals include "the pre-Islamic custom of Sa'y (running) between *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwah* hills in the celebration of Hagar's running between these two hills looking for water" (Hedayetullah 79). However, there were serious transgressions in the pre-Islamic *Hajj* that included glorifying idols and sacrificing to them.

The pre-Islamic concept of *Hajj* was marked by its idolatry and polytheistic practices. The rites of *Hajj* that were observed during the pre-Islamic era were utterly tarnished. According to the exegete al-Baghawī, early Muslims were reluctant to perform *Sa'y* due to its association with idols placed on *Al-Ṣafā* and *Al-Marwah* in the pre-Islamic era (1 173). Moreover, both men and women used to walk naked when circumambulating *al-Ka'bah*, claiming that they assumed the same condition they would be in when resurrecting after death (Mawdudi 254). According to Mawdudi, "The degree to which *Hajj* was corrupted in that period of ignorance can be gauged from the fact that it degenerated into an annual carnival. The *Hajj* became an important social event for many Arabian tribes" (254). The period of *Hajj* was an occasion for tribes to compete and to flaunt their generosity. Singing, revelry, drinking, and adultery were indulged in during *Hajj*.

Islam purges *Hajj* of the wicked and polytheistic practices of the pre-Islamic era. It brings *Hajj* to its legitimate Abrahamic origin and eliminates the inequality that marks the pre-Islamic *Hajj*. According to Hughes, the Prophet "did not seek to annul or change the rites […] sought to purify and rededicate the rights to the One God Almighty as the Prophet Abraham had done before" (5). Islam approves the authentic rituals inherited from the religion of Abraham and forbids the manifestations of polytheism.

The DFs of *Hajj* are documented not only by the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* but also by historical practice and mass transmission. A definitive practical demonstration of the rites was performed by the Prophet in the presence of nearly one hundred thousand Muslims during the farewell *Hajj*. Muslims then transmitted this demonstration collectively and kept no room for ambiguity or confusion. *Hajj* is also uniquely defined by the city where it is performed. Mecca, where all *Hajj* takes place, dominates the whole Arabian Peninsula. The religious significance of Mecca was established long before Islam. According to a *hadith* narrated by Ibn Abbas, it was in Mecca that Allah ordered Ibrahim to leave Hagar and her young son Ismail (al-Bukhārī 38). The *Qur'an* also refers to this story in the verse "Our Lord! I have settled some of my offspring in a barren valley, near Your Sacred House, our Lord, so that they may establish prayer. So make

the hearts of ˹believing˺ people incline towards them and provide them with fruits, so perhaps they will be thankful" (*Qur'an* 14:37).

This deep-rooted reverence for the al-Ka'bah reinforced Mecca's status as the focal point for "pilgrimage." Mecca attained its special sanctity from *al-Ka'bah*, which was first built by angels two thousand years before the creation of Adam. It was rebuilt by Ibrahim, then by the Prophet's uncle Abd al-Muttalib; afterwards, it was rebuilt by Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr, then by al-Hajjaj. Thus, *al-Ka'bah* has been revered by the Arabs from the depths of antiquity.

*Hajj* is profoundly shaped by its socio-economic distinctive features. The verse (*Qur'an* 2:198) permits pilgrims to engage in trade to alleviate the concern of its prohibition. The economic benefits of *Hajj* are promoted by the state of peace that it guarantees. *Hajj* has always been a commercial occasion protected by the truce established during the holy months. *Hajj* assumes two essential DFs: peace and commerciality. Peace is maintained not only among humans but also between humans and the environment. Hunting animals and cutting down trees are forbidden during the period of *Hajj*. According to Hedayetullah, all tribal hostilities were forbidden during the sacred period of *Hajj*, and therefore, business flourishes (78). Peters states that "tribes that, for some reasons of danger or distance, did not normally associate, could come together under the protection of the truce of God to worship and, it seems clear, to trade" (44). *Hajj* promotes the economy of hundreds of towns on the roads to Mecca. According to Leeuwen, "The yearly *Hajj* was of immense importance to Damascus, not only as a religious feast, but also in the economic field" (104). *Hajj* is a yearly social and cultural event that brings Muslims from all over the world together. Muslims from different ethnic groups feel a bond of solidarity for one another. They set all their differences aside and promote social cooperation and human coexistence. It is an international forum where social and cultural gaps are bridged, and tolerance is maintained. *Hajj* fosters unity, cooperation, and tolerance across diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

A key social DF is the profound sense of equality. The standardized rituals and simple *al-Iḥrām* outfit make all pilgrims equal regardless of their social status, race, ethnicity, and color. Hamdeh notes that *Hajj* "creates a sense of equality between the black and white, rich and poor, ruler and ruled, […] removes all symbols of class, rank or society […] can be viewed as a celebration of the multiplicity of cultures and lifestyles" (140). Pilgrims demonstrate their shared identity by participating in the same rituals as a community and by donning clothing that emphasizes their equality. In his famous letter from Mecca, Malcolm X states that "we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white" (346).

Another DF that had long characterized the concept of *Hajj* was risk. The performers of *Hajj* were not tourists who enjoyed the comfort of traveling in business class flights and staying in air-conditioned five-star hotels; they had to encounter dangers and hardships while traveling for months, passing through perilous lands whose inhabitants were often inhospitable. Darke states that "There was always the danger of Bedouin raiding parties who had to be fought or bought off" (117). Ensuring the safety and organization of the "pilgrimage" caravans became a function of state administration. Several Islamic states took charge of the *Hajj*. The Ottoman Empire, for instance, organized caravans and protected them from all dangers. Leeuwen refers to "the organization of the pilgrimage had to be arranged, administratively, logistically and financially" (117). The concept of *Hajj* acquires the complementary distinctive feature of being state-controlled. *Hajj* is not an individual matter but a communal one, which is undertaken by public bodies and officials.

The other complementary distinctive feature is festivity. Departures and arrivals of pilgrims are accompanied by diverting celebrations. Ceremonies are held to bid them farewell and wish

them a safe journey when heading towards Mecca. Moreover, *Hajj* above all promotes spirituality and discourages materialism. Pilgrims get rid of their worldly appearances, detach from their habits, and devote their entire selves for the sake of Allah. *Hajj* is intended to make pilgrims enter constant remembrance of Allah and detach from this world.

**Table 3**

Contextual-Based Distinctive Features

| **Contextual Distinctive Features** |
|---|
| Rooted in pre-Islamic Ibrahimic tradition. |
| Historically transmitted and documented through mass participation and collective reporting. |
| Characterized by significant economic dimensions, facilitated by mandated peace. |
| Functions as a major social and cultural gathering promoting unity and equality. |
| Historically and often currently involves state-level administration and control. |
| Associated with communal festivity surrounding departures and returns. |
| Fundamentally oriented towards spiritual purification and devotion. |

## Contrastive Analysis

The above three-phase analysis delimits the concept of *Hajj* by delineating its essential and complementary DFs as they are derived from intratextual, intertextual, and contextual exegetical references. The following contrastive conceptual analysis aims to evaluate the extent to which the prevalent English translations adequately convey this delineated conceptual representation. A comparative analysis reveals that the term "pilgrimage" is frequently adopted as the target language (TL) equivalent for *Hajj* in English translations of the *Qur'an*. Table 4 lists ten translations of the term *Hajj* in the verse (*Qur'an* 3:97):

**Table 4**

English translations of the Qur'anic term *Hajj*

| Sale | Ali | Pickthall | Asad | Arberry |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| To Visit | Pilgrimage | pilgrimage | pilgrimage | to come to |
| Bewley and Bewley | Irving | Al-Hilali and Khan | Saheeh International | Haleem |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hajj | Pilgrimage | Hajj (pilgrimage to Makkah) | pilgrimage | pilgrimage |

Seven out of the ten above-listed translations provide "pilgrimage" as the English equivalent of the concept of *Hajj*. This translation is merely the first lexical equivalent provided by most bilingual Arabic-English dictionaries, specialized dictionaries, and encyclopedias. These sources give extensive definitions that explain the concept's religious specificity in the context of Islam. When this equivalent is provided without adequate contextualization or explanatory paratext, it fails to capture the conceptual representation and culture-specific dimensions of the Islamic term. *Hajj* includes a set of DFs that are not fully captured by the equivalent "pilgrimage."

From a diachronic perspective, the lexical meaning of the word pilgrimage derives from the Latin word *peregrinus*, denoting a wanderer or stranger traveling in foreign countries away from his place of residence. Unlike the rich lexical semes of *Hajj* that refer to an intentional, purposeful, determined, recurrent, testimonial visit, the lexical meaning of "pilgrimage" is limited to wandering in a distant place.

The conceptual representation of "pilgrimage" has been strongly associated with the Christian tradition. The concept refers to a voluntary, long, challenging journey to sacred places such as Jerusalem or Rome. Kay states that "In Christianity, pilgrimages were first made to sites connected with the birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus" (102). Åkerdahl mentions that "The pilgrim is traveling to a place that is holy to his or her religion" (174). Inbari defines "pilgrimage" as "a sacred journey of spiritual ascension to a spiritual center, a mythical land of pristine existence" (13). Biblical references link "pilgrimage" to specific festivals and agricultural cycles (Exodus 23:14; Luke 2:41–43).

"Pilgrimage" has recently shifted from religion to tourism. The DFs of the concept are currently more marked by tourism rather than religion. Enongene and Griffin notice that the concept of "pilgrimage" is now more associated with the domains of tourism and entertainment than religion and spirituality (6–30). They assert that "the need for entertainment is identified as taking center stage during modern pilgrimage journeys" (Enongene and Griffin 26). Their study concludes that "pilgrimage" to Jerusalem and other Christian centers is tourism in its literal sense and has little to do with religion as most pilgrims to these sites are atheists (Enongene and Griffin 9). This stands in stark contrast to the obligatory, rigorously defined, and exclusively Allah-centered nature of *Hajj* established through exegetical textual analysis. Consequently, employing "pilgrimage" risks imposing a TL conceptual framework that significantly misrepresents the SL term. Using "pilgrimage" as an equivalent to *Hajj* flattens and obscures its distinctiveness and produces a superficial and inaccurate translation.

## Findings

The contrastive analysis indicates that rendering the Qur'anic concept *Hajj* as "pilgrimage" constitutes a significant mistranslation. Although both terms share a general feature related to visiting a sacred place, the conceptual representation diverges considerably. "Pilgrimage" functions as a hypernym encompassing diverse journeys, from a journey to a stadium, a revered personality, or a grave like that of Shakespeare to a journey to the Church of the Nativity. Most of these types of journeys, including the one to Jerusalem, do not correlate with God or religion.

The concept of *Hajj* loses nearly all its DFs when translated as "pilgrimage." This mistranslation elides nearly all the DFs such as its obligatory nature (a pillar of Islam), specific timeframe, prescribed rituals (*al-Iḥrām*, *Tawaf*, *Saʿy*, ʿArafah), and exclusive devotion to Allah. *Hajj* is one of the five pillars of Islam, and it is obligatory for every Muslim who has the means and the ability to perform it; however, "pilgrimage" in Christianity is voluntary and has become more associated with tourism, celebration, and entertainment rather than religion. The TL term "pilgrimage" in its contemporary usage as a tourist activity fails to convey the compulsory, highly structured, and spiritually central character of *Hajj* within Islam.

Alternative renderings, such as "to visit" (Sale) or "to come to" (Arberry), are even more reductive, misleading the target reader into believing that the fifth pillar of Islam is simply a visit to Mecca. All the DFs of the concept are stripped away by such translations that reduce its complexity and deceive TL readers. Such approaches represent an extreme form of conceptual reduction, failing to communicate the term's conceptual density.

Transliteration or cultural borrowing without sufficient explanation, as employed by Al-Hilali and Khan with "*Hajj* (pilgrimage to Makkah)" or Bewley and Bewley with "*Hajj*" alone, may still understate the conceptual richness of *Hajj*. They should have provided their translation with an explanatory note detailing the essential DFs. It is true that explanatory notes are intrusive and can sometimes be annoying, but they are necessary to help the target reader understand rich concepts such as *Hajj*. Noviyenty et al. argue that "In the beginning, translators often translate the term *Zakat* [for instance] by providing additional explanations that follow the term. However, after Arabic-English infusion has been done, the word *zakat* has been common to English use" (879). The English target reader has become familiar with numerous Islamic concepts, such as halal and imam that have already been integrated into the English language (Noviyenty et al. 879). The concept of *Hajj,* as well, will eventually become the subject of that Arabic-English culture infusion, and translators will no longer be under the obligation of including explanatory notes to clarify it.

Terms such as *Hajj* may eventually undergo naturalization or assimilation into the TL through prolonged exposure and Arabic-English culture infusion, potentially reducing the future need for extensive explanation. However, until such assimilation occurs, paratextual support remains crucial. These findings highlight the necessity of rigorous conceptual analysis—grounded in intratextual, intertextual, and contextual exegesis—before selecting a translation strategy. Only by first fully delineating the source concept's DFs can a translator make an informed decision about how best to render it in TL.

## Conclusion

The present study has analyzed the Qur'anic term *Hajj* and assessed its translation to pilgrimage. What emerged most clearly from this study is that Qur'anic translation is not, and cannot be, a matter of mere lexical substitution. One of the findings that struck me most was the persistence of domestication in many English translations. Renderings such as "pilgrimage" or "holy pilgrimage" appear again and again, not only in widely circulated versions like Yusuf Ali's or Arberry's, but even in the more recent translation of Abdel Haleem. The act of translating Qur'anic terms has often leaned towards domestication rather than foreignization. This problem is not unique to *Hajj*. Terms such as *Salah*, *Zakat*, and *Taqwa* face similar challenges. The risk is to re-inscribe Qur'anic terms into a Western conceptual framework that subtly alters its message.

The conceptual analyses of *Hajj* and "pilgrimage" reveal significant conceptual divergence. The SL term *Hajj* encapsulates essential and complementary DFs that the TL term "pilgrimage" fails to convey. A direct lexical substitution based on bilingual dictionaries, without relying on

intratextual, intertextual, and contextual references, produces superficial, inaccurate, and misleading translations that strip Qur'anic terms of their distinctiveness. *Hajj*'s features are erased, elided, and neutralized by this equivalent that fails to convey essential DFs of the SL concept. This literal substitution of *Hajj* is a loss of conceptual richness and a significant misrepresentation of the Qur'anic concept.

Adopting a domesticated equivalent erases the foreignness and strangeness of the source text and fails to encourage the reader to explore the concept further. While domestication is acceptable in translating the Bible, it is inadequate for translating Qur'anic terms like *Hajj*. The conceptual map established by this study enables the selection of a translation strategy that ensures conceptual accuracy. The paper suggests implementing a foreignization strategy that transliterates the Qur'anic term and accompanies it with an explanatory paratext (e.g., footnotes, endnotes, or bracketed glosses) that clarifies its DFs. This ensures that the translation respects the source text's integrity while providing the TL reader with the necessary conceptual framework. The explanatory note should be used to familiarize the target reader with the concept and contribute to its dissemination. This dissemination is already reinforced by English-speaking Muslim communities using it instead of "pilgrimage." This note should be based on intratextual, intertextual, and contextual references that elucidate the concept's DFs.

Qur'anic terms should not be translated as general words but as specialized terms referring to complex concepts with defining features. Sager argues that "A concept represents the mental image associated with a term, and in specialized translation, grasping this image is essential to accurate rendering" (57). Translators should not translate a key Qur'anic term unless they conduct lexical, conceptual, and contrastive analyses.

My analysis raises important questions for future research. First, there is a pressing need for more empirical work on reader reception: how do different audiences respond to transliterations and explanatory notes? Second, further comparative studies could trace how Qur'anic terms are handled across multiple languages—not just English. The problem of equivalence is not unique to English, and widening the lens would enrich our understanding of how *Hajj* and other key terms are reframed globally.

## Works Cited

Abdel Haleem, M. A. S. "The Role of Context in Interpreting and Translating the Qur'an." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2018, pp. 47–66.

---. *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

---. *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2010.

Abdul-Raof, Hasan. *Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis*. Routledge, 2010.

Acar, M. "An Opportunity Unexploited: A Pilgrim's Observations on the Potential of Muslim Pilgrimage (Hajj)." *Islamic Tourism: Management of Travel Destinations*, edited by A. Jamal, K. Griffin, and R. Raj, CABI, 2019, pp. 141–153.

Aḥmad, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2008.

Aichele, George, and George A. Phillips. "Introduction: Exegesis, Eisegesis, Intergesis." *Semeia*, vols. 69–70, 1996, pp. 7–18.

Ajbar, Omar. "Analyzing and Assessing the Translation of Quranic Terms Based on the Tridimensional Exegetic Analysis Model: Ṣalāh as a Case Study." *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, vol. 7, no. 11, 2024, pp. 67–74. https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2024.7.11.8

Åkerdahl, P.-O. *Bahā'ī Identity and the Concept of Martyrdom*. Bahá'í-förlaget AB, 2002.

al-Alūsī, Maḥmūd Shihāb al-Dīn. *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm*. Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1994.
al-Baghawī, al-Ḥusayn ibn Masʿūd. *Maʿālim al-Tanzīl*. Dār Ṭayyibah, 1989.
al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2007.
al-Fīrūzābādī, Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb. *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2008.
al-Nasāʾī, Aḥmad ibn Shuʿayb. *Sunan al-Nasāʾī*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2009.
al-Qurṭubī, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. *Al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*. Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīyah, 1964.
al-Rāzī, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr. *Mukhtār al-Ṣiḥāḥ*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 1999.
al-Ṭabarī, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr. *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*. Dār al-Maʿārif, 1968.
Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*. Amana Corporation, 1989.
Arberry, Arthur J. *The Koran Interpreted*. Allen & Unwin, 1955.
Asad, Muhammad. *The Message of the Qur'ān*. Dar Al-Andalus, 1980.
Bewley, Aisha, and Abdalhaqq Bewley. *The Noble Qur'an: A New Rendering of Its Meaning in English*. Ta-Ha Publishers, 1999.
The Bible Gateway. *www.biblegateway.com/*. Accessed 13 Nov. 2023.
Cabré, Maria Teresa. *Terminology: Theory, Methods and Applications*. John Benjamins, 1999.
Catford, J. C. *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*. Oxford University Press, 1965.
Darke, Diana. *Syria*. Bradt Travel Guides, 2010.
The English Standard Version Bible. *www.esvbible.org/*. Accessed 12 Oct. 2023.
Enongene, Vreny, and Kevin A. Griffin. "Christianity—Contemporary Christian Pilgrimage and Traditional Management Practices at Sacred Sites." *Pilgrimage and Tourism to Holy Cities*, edited by Maria Leppäkari and Kevin A. Griffin, CABI, 2017, pp. 37–53.
Ghorianfar, S. M., et al. "Foreignization and Domestication in Translating Culture-Specific Items: A Case Study of Yusuf Ali's Surah Al-Baqarah." *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2025, pp. 147–163. https://jssh.edu.af/jssh/article/view/123
Hamdeh, Emad. "Islam." *Rituals and Practices in World Religions*, edited by David B. Yaden et al., Springer Nature, 2020, pp. 130–149.
Hedayetullah, Muhammad. *A Compact Survey of Islamic Civilization*. AuthorHouse, 2012.
Hughes, Thomas Patrick. *A Dictionary of Islam*. W. H. Allen, 1885.
Ibn Kathīr, Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*. Vol. 21, Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2000.
Ibn Mājah, Muḥammad ibn Yazīd. *Sunan Ibn Mājah*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2009.
Ibn Manẓūr, Muḥammad ibn Mukarram. *Lisān al-ʿArab*. Vol. 2, Dār Ṣādir, 1990.
Inbari, Motti. "Judaism—Jewish and Israeli Pilgrimage Experience: Constructing National Identity." *Pilgrimage and Tourism to Holy Cities*, edited by Maria Leppäkari and Kevin A. Griffin, CABI, 2017, pp. 23–36.
Irving, Thomas Ballantyne. *The Qur'an: The First American Version*. Amana Books, 1985.
Kay, W. A. *Running—The Sacred Art: Preparing to Practice*. SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2007.
Leeuwen, Richard. *Waqfs and Urban Structures: The Case of Ottoman Damascus*. Brill, 1999.
Levinson, Stephen C. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.
Linde, Charlotte. *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
Majmaʿ al-Lughah al-ʿArabīyah. *Al-Muʿjam al-Wasīṭ*. 4th ed., Dār al-Daʿwah, 2004.
Malcolm X. "Letter from Mecca." *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as told to Alex Haley, Ballantine Books, 1965.
Mawdudi, Sayyid Abul A'la. *The Meaning of the Qur'an*. Translated by Khurshid Ahmad, Islamic Publications, 1967.
Muslim, Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2010.

Newmark, Peter. *Approaches to Translation*. Pergamon Press, 1981.
Nida, Eugene A. *Toward a Science of Translating*. Brill, 1964.
Nida, Eugene A., and Charles R. Taber. *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Brill, 1969.
Nord, Christiane. *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*. Routledge, 1997.
Noviyenty, Lisa, et al. "Arabic Terms Translation: Culture Infusion in English." *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, vol. 5, no. 8, 2022, pp. 879–890.
Peters, F. E. *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places*. Princeton University Press, 1994.
Pickthall, Marmaduke. *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: An Explanatory Translation*. George Allen & Unwin, 1930.
"Prayer." *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 2022, www.internationalstandardbible.com/. Accessed 13 Nov. 2023.
The Qur'an. Translated by Qur'ani. Islamic Publishing House, 2019.
Sager, Juan C. *A Practical Course in Terminology Processing*. John Benjamins, 1990.
Saheeh International. *The Qur'an: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meanings*. Dar Abul Qasim, 1997.
Sale, George. *The Alcoran of Mohammed*. W. Bulmer and Co., 1825.
Sharrock, Alison, and Helen Morales, editors. *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
Tirmidhī, Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsā. *Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī*. Translated by Abu Khaliyl, Darussalam, 2014.
Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2008.
---. "Translation, Intertextuality, Interpretation." *Romance Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2009, pp. 157–173. https://doi.org/10.1179/174581509X455169.
Vermeer, Hans J. "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action." Translated by Andrew Chesterman, *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, Routledge, 2000, pp. 221–232.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# The Affective Public Sphere: Emotion as the Engine of Media Accountability in the MENA Region

**Brahim Elboukhari and Abdelmalek El Kadoussi**
Laboratory of Language and Society, Faculty of Languages, Letters and Arts,
Ibn Tofaïl University, Morocco

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.7439

**Brahim Elboukhari** holds a PhD in Communication and Argumentation from the "Science of Language and Communication" program at Ibn Tofaïl University. He currently serves as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructor at the CPGE Centre, Moulay Ismail High School, Meknes. His research explores the intersections of media, communication, and language teaching, with a specific focus on integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the classroom. An active scholar, Dr. Elboukhari frequently presents at national and international conferences on media studies, educational technology, and professional development.

br.elboukhari@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1604-5532

**Abdelmalek El Kadoussi** is an associate professor of Media and Communication at Ibn Tofaïl University, Kenitra, Morocco. His research focuses on media accountability, press freedom, and the evolving role of digital platforms in Moroccan society. He has published several peer-reviewed articles exploring self-censorship among journalists, the transformation of the Moroccan press, and the influence of social media on religious and cultural narratives. His work contributes to a deeper understanding of media systems in non-Western contexts and the socio-political dynamics shaping public discourse in Morocco.

abdelmalek.elkadoussi@uit.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5722-8404

Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 23-05-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# The Affective Public Sphere: Emotion as the Engine of Media Accountability in the MENA Region

**Brahim Elboukhari and Abdelmalek El Kadoussi**
Laboratory of Language and Society, Faculty of Languages, Letters and Arts,
Ibn Tofaïl University, Morocco

## ABSTRACT

The normative ideal of the Habermasian public sphere—characterized as rational, critical, and dispassionate—has long served as the primary yardstick for evaluating media accountability. However, in the "hybrid regimes" of the Global South, particularly within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), this Western-centric model fails to capture the visceral mechanisms through which citizens actually discipline power. This article challenges the universal applicability of the rationalist model by proposing the "Affective Public Sphere" as a more accurate analytical framework for understanding digital dissent. Focusing on the digital landscape of Morocco, the study argues that media accountability is not driven by formal policy deliberation but by a "Moral Economy" of deeply embedded shared values. Through a constructivist thematic analysis of approximately 1,200 unique user-generated comments across three high-profile case studies occurring between 2022 and 2025, this research identifies three distinct "Pillars of Affect" that trigger public sanction: Humanitarian Grief, National Identity, and Cultural Dignity. The findings suggest that the digital public operates through what the authors term the "Value-Trigger Hypothesis": media accountability remains largely dormant during technical or policy errors until a perceived transgression violates a sacred communal value. At this juncture, the "digital street" erupts into a performative ritual of collective shaming. While this affective mobilization provides a vital channel for the voiceless to reclaim agency, the article concludes that it ultimately produces a majoritarian, exclusionary consensus. This creates a dangerous feedback loop that authoritarian states can easily co-opt to legitimize censorship and tighten control over the press under the pervasive guise of maintaining "public respect."

## KEYWORDS

**Affective Publics**

**Media Accountability**

**Moral Economy**

**Hybrid Regimes**

**Digital Journalism**

**Morocco**

## Introduction

For decades, the normative ideal of the "public sphere," as conceptualized by Jürgen Habermas (27), has cast a long shadow over media studies. In this vision, the public sphere is a space of rational-critical debate where private individuals assemble to hold power to account through reasoned argumentation, bracketing their status and emotions to achieve consensus. While this model has provided an invaluable yardstick for assessing democratic health in the West, its universal application to the Global South—and specifically to the digitally mediated landscapes

Contact ✉ br.elboukhari@gmail.com ✉ abdelmalek.elkadoussi@uit.ac.ma
©2026

of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—has increasingly revealed an epistemic blind spot. In the digital bazaars of Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, where the modern Moroccan public gathers, the currency of accountability is not dispassionate reason or policy deliberation (Ait Hattani 21). It is visceral, volatile, and profoundly emotional.

This article posits that in transitional democracies and hybrid regimes, the "rational" public sphere is an analytical fiction. Instead, what has emerged is a vibrant **"***Affective Public Sphere,***"** where emotion serves not as noise to be filtered out, but as the primary engine of media accountability. Focusing on the Moroccan context—a strategic case study of a competitive authoritarian regime with high digital penetration (Reuters Institute)—we argue that the ability of citizens to discipline powerful media institutions relies less on legal literacy or professional codes than on the mobilization of **"***Shared Values***."**

In Morocco, a "red line" crossed by a journalist is rarely framed as a technical error or a breach of contract; it is experienced and articulated as a perceived moral violation of collective dignity, national sovereignty, or religious sanctity. When the digital crowd mobilized against what it perceived as the transformation of the Rayan Aourram tragedy into a prolonged media spectacle, they invoked the sanctity of suffering and the moral boundaries of crisis reporting, framing continuous live coverage and emotive narration as perceived moral violations of human dignity rather than citing a specific breach of professional codes. When they attacked a sports broadcaster for airing an incomplete map of the country, the grievance was not cartographic inaccuracy, but an assault on national identity. In these moments, accountability becomes a performative ritual of moral restoration rather than a procedural act of regulation.

## The Failure of the Rational Model in Hybrid Regimes

To understand why emotion has become the dominant vernacular of accountability in the MENA region, one must first locate the structural constraints of the media environment. Morocco operates as a "hybrid regime" (Ibahrine and Zaid 248), characterized by a complex interplay between democratic facades and authoritarian habits. In such an environment, the traditional pillars of accountability—an independent judiciary, a self-regulating press, and a competitive market—are frequently compromised or co-opted. The state maintains "red lines" around sensitive topics (the Monarchy, Islam, and Territorial Integrity), cultivating a culture of self-censorship within professional newsrooms (Benchenna and Marchetti 668; El Kadoussi 238).

In this context, the Habermasian ideal of "rational-critical debate" faces a dual crisis. First, the political cost of rational dissent can be high; engaging in direct political critique carries the risk of surveillance or legal sanction. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the formal language of policy and regulation is often viewed by the public as the language of the elite—distant, bureaucratic, and ineffectual. Consequently, the digital public bypasses these frozen formal channels. They turn to social media not to debate policy, but to express *affect*—a pre-discursive intensity that allows for political expression without necessarily engaging in explicit political speech. As Papacharissi suggests, these "affective publics" mobilize through sentiment, creating a sense of connectedness that can challenge power structures (125).

However, existing literature often treats this emotional mobilization as "slacktivism" or "mob rule"—a chaotic force that degrades the quality of public discourse. This article challenges that dismissal. By analyzing the specific mechanics of digital outrage in Morocco, we demonstrate that this emotion is not chaotic; it is highly structured. It follows a specific **"***moral economy***"** (Thompson 79), a tacit agreement on the values that hold society together. When media institutions are perceived to violate this moral economy—by mocking a cultural icon, crossing culturally embedded moral boundaries surrounding death and mourning, or

insulting national pride—emotion becomes the mechanism through which the social contract is enforced.

## The Argument: Shared Values as Accountability Triggers

This study draws on a rigorous mixed-methods investigation of the Moroccan media landscape, including the analysis of nine high-profile accountability episodes between 2022 and 2025. While our previous work (Zaid et al. 770) mapped the process of hybrid accountability (Naming, Blaming, Claiming), this article investigates the *substance* of that accountability. We ask: *What specific triggers cause an online audience to transform from passive consumers into an active, sanctioning swarm?*

We argue that the "Public Frame" of accountability remains dormant until a perceived media transgression intersects with one of three pillars of Moroccan identity:

1. *Humanitarian Ethics:* The defense of human dignity against commercial exploitation (e.g., the Rayan tragedy).
2. *National Identity:* The defense of sovereignty and collective pride against external or internal humiliation (e.g., the Divided Map controversy).
3. *Cultural Respect*: The defense of traditional hierarchies and cultural icons against perceived modernization or bullying (e.g., the Hassan Mikyat case).

In each of these instances, the public did not demand accountability because a journalist failed to verify a source; they demanded it because the media outlet was perceived to have "insulted" the collective self. This suggests that, in contexts such as Morocco, media accountability is often less about "accuracy" and more about "respect."

## Significance and Roadmap

This reframing has profound implications for the sociology of media in the Global South. It suggests that we cannot understand media governance without understanding cultural sociology. The "digital street" in Morocco is not an anarchy; it is a space where the community negotiates its moral boundaries in real-time. By enforcing these boundaries against media transgressors, the public is not just correcting the news; they are reclaiming agency in a political system that often denies it to them.

However, this reliance on affect is a double-edged sword. As we will explore, an accountability system driven by emotion is inherently majoritarian. It excels at punishing those who violate the consensus (nationalism, religion) but is often hostile to those who challenge it. The same affective intensity that can force a corrupt broadcaster to apologize can also silence minority voices or descend into cyberbullying, as seen in the *Ghita Asfour* case.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, integrating Papacharissi's concept of "affective publics" with the sociological concept of "moral economies." Section 3 details the methodology, utilizing a thematic analysis of user comments from three key case studies derived from the doctoral research. Section 4 presents the empirical analysis, dissecting the three pillars of affect—Humanitarianism, Nationalism, and Cultural Respect—through the lens of user-generated content. Section 5 discusses the implications of the "Value-Trigger" and the exclusionary nature of affective unity. Finally, Section 6 concludes by arguing that for media scholars and practitioners in the MENA region, emotion must be read not as noise, but as the essential signal of democratic demand.

## Theoretical Framework: From Rational Debate to Affective Sanction

To understand how the "digital street" in the MENA region holds media institutions accountable, we must abandon the analytical safety of the rational-critical model. The dynamics observed in the Moroccan digital sphere—where a broadcast error triggers a diplomatic crisis or a comedy sketch sparks a national debate on dignity—cannot be explained by legal frameworks or market logic alone. They require a theoretical architecture that accounts for the visceral, the symbolic, and the communal. This section constructs that framework by triangulating three distinct bodies of literature: the theory of *Affective Publics*, the sociology of *Moral Economies,* and the political science of *Hybrid Regime*s (Castells 55).

### De-Westernizing the Public Sphere: The Limits of Rationality

The concept of the public sphere, as originally formulated by Jürgen Habermas (27), posits a domain where public opinion is formed through rational-critical debate. In this normative ideal, interlocutors bracket their status, set aside their private emotions, and engage in discourse guided by the force of the better argument. For decades, this model has served as the baseline for assessing media accountability: the media provides information, and the public rationally evaluates it.

However, scholars of the Global South and digital media have long argued that this model is structurally exclusionary and empirically insufficient (Curran and Park 3). Nancy Fraser famously critiqued the Habermasian sphere as a bourgeois construct that ignores "subaltern counterpublics"—groups who mobilize not through dispassionate debate, but through the assertion of identity and the disruption of dominant norms (67). In the context of the MENA region, the "rational" public sphere is often doubly constrained: first by the state, which polices the boundaries of "acceptable" political speech, and second by a cultural context where communication is deeply embedded in social hierarchies, religious values, and communal bonds rather than atomized individualism (Salvatore and Eickelman 5).

In the digital age, this rationalist framework fractures completely. The affordances of social media platforms—speed, brevity, visuality, and algorithmic amplification—do not favor the slow deliberation of the coffee house; they favor the immediate intensity of the "feed." To analyze media accountability in Morocco, therefore, we must turn to a framework that recognizes emotion not as a contamination of public discourse, but as its primary currency.

### Affective Publics: Emotion as Connectivity

The primary theoretical lens for this study is Zizi Papacharissi's concept of **"***Affective Publics***."** Papacharissi argues that in digitally mediated environments, publics are constituted not through shared ideology or policy goals, but through shared sentiment (125). Affect—a pre-discursive intensity, a feeling of being moved—becomes the glue that binds disparate individuals into a collective force.

In the MENA context, media accountability increasingly operates through what Zizi Papacharissi conceptualizes as affective publics: networked formations held together not only by information but also by shared emotional expression (Papacharissi 125–27). This perspective complements Miriyam Aouragh's analysis of Arab digital activism, which demonstrates that online participation is inseparable from broader political identities, collective struggles, and offline mobilization rather than merely technological affordances (Aouragh 531–32). Social media therefore become spaces where accountability claims are articulated not only through deliberative arguments but also through shared feelings of injustice, dignity, humiliation, and

solidarity. When Moroccan citizens challenge a media outlet, they frequently seek to express collective moral outrage rather than simply identify violations of professional journalistic codes. In these cases, accountability is enacted through affective alignment, transforming individual emotional responses into collective public pressure.

This aligns with Bennett and Segerberg's logic of "connective action," where personalized expression becomes the basis for collective mobilization (739). However, this study extends the concept of Affective Publics by applying it specifically to Media Accountability. Most literature applies this theory to anti-government protests (e.g., the Arab Spring). We argue that the same mechanism applies to "anti-media" protests. When the public creates a hashtag like #TrashMedia or #Boycott2M, they are forming an affective public whose goal is to discipline the narrative power of the press (Highfield 2034).

Crucially, this affect is not merely "venting." As Sara Ahmed argues in The Cultural Politics of Emotion, emotions are performative; they "do things" (4). Shame, for instance, is a disciplinary emotion. When the digital crowd "shames" a broadcaster for unethical coverage, they are performing a social sanction that can be more damaging than a regulator's fine. In a hybrid regime where formal regulators may be slow or co-opted, the "affective flashpoint" becomes the most efficient mechanism for enforcing norms.

## The Moral Economy of the Digital Crowd

If affect provides the *energy* for mobilization, what provides the *structure*? Why does one media error spark a revolution while another is ignored? To answer this, we turn to the concept of **"***Moral Economy***."**

Originally coined by E. P. Thompson to explain eighteenth-century food riots, the "moral economy" refers to the tacit consensus within a community regarding what is legitimate and what is illegitimate (79). Thompson argued that peasant riots were not chaotic outbursts of hunger, but disciplined actions enforcing a traditional consensus on fair prices. The crowd punished the baker not because he broke a written law, but because he was perceived to violate the unwritten moral contract of the community.

This article transposes Thompson's framework to the digital media landscape of the twenty-first century. We argue that the Moroccan digital public operates according to a strict Moral Economy of Information.

- *The* Consensus*:* There exists a tacit agreement between the public and the media. The media is granted access and attention, but in return, it must respect certain "sacred" boundaries: the dignity of the dead (Humanitarianism), the honor of the nation (Nationalism), and the sanctity of cultural traditions (Identity).
- *The Perceived Moral Violation:* When a media outlet engages in "grief mining," mocks a cultural icon, or compromises national sovereignty, they are not just committing a professional error; they are perceived to be violating the Moral Economy. They are seen as "profiteers" extracting value from the community's pain or pride without giving respect in return.
- *The Riot:* The resulting social media backlash is the digital equivalent of Thompson's bread riot. It is a collective, punitive action designed to restore the moral order.

Didier Fassin's work on "moral sentiments" is also instructive here. Fassin argues that modern politics is increasingly conducted through the register of morality and victimhood (1–2). In our case studies, we observe that accountability claims are frequently framed through the language of victimization: *The media hurt us; the media insulted us.* This moral framing is powerful because it transcends political divisions. A conservative Islamist and a secular liberal may

disagree on tax policy, but they share the same "Moral Economy" regarding the sanctity of national borders or the dignity of a grieving mother.

### Accountability in the Hybrid Regime: The "Safety Valve"

The final theoretical pillar contextualizes these dynamics within the specific political architecture of the *Hybrid Regime*. Morocco, often described as a "competitive authoritarian" system (Levitsky and Way 5; Zaid and Ibahrine 310), occupies a grey zone. It possesses the trappings of democracy (elections, diverse press, parliament) but retains a centralized core of authoritarian power (the Monarchy and the state).

In such systems, the "political sphere" is heavily policed. Direct criticism of the monarchy or the security apparatus carries high risks. However, the "social sphere" and the "cultural sphere" often serve as permitted arenas for contestation—a "safety valve" for public frustration. This structural reality shapes media accountability in two profound ways:

1. *Displacement of Dissent:* Because citizens cannot easily hold the state accountable for systemic failures, they displace their frustration onto the media. The media becomes the proxy target. Punishing a journalist is safer and more achievable than punishing a minister. Therefore, the "affective intensity" directed at the media is often surplus energy diverted from political grievances.
2. *State-Public Alignment***:** In a fascinating inversion of the Western model (where the public protects the press from the state), the Moral Economy of the hybrid regime often aligns the public *with* the state against the press. When a media outlet violates national norms (e.g., the *Divided Map* case), the public calls on the state to intervene. The digital crowd acts as a "vigilante" force that invites state repression of the media, viewing the state as the guardian of the moral order.

### Synthesis: The Affective-Moral Accountability Model

Synthesizing these streams, we propose a theoretical model where:

- *Affect* is the fuel: It provides the speed and scale of mobilization.
- *Moral Economy* is the compass: It determines which transgressions trigger a response.
- *Hybridity* is the terrain: It channels this energy away from formal politics and toward cultural/media targets.

In this model, accountability is not a bureaucratic procedure (filing a complaint); it is a *Ritual of Correction.* It is a public performance where the community reaffirms its values by shaming those who violate them. The effectiveness of this accountability is not measured by policy change, but by the public act of apology and the restoration of "face."

## Methodology: Excavating the Digital Sentiment

To operationalize the theoretical framework outlined above, this study employs a qualitative, interpretative methodology rooted in *Digital Ethnography* and *Thematic Analysis.* While the broader doctoral research utilized a mixed-methods approach including surveys and interviews, this article focuses exclusively on the textual and affective analysis of user-generated content (UGC) surrounding three paradigmatic case studies (Bruns 9).

The methodological objective is not to quantify the volume of outrage (how many tweets?), but to interpret the *nature* of the sentiment (what *kind* of outrage?). We seek to reconstruct the "Moral Economy" of the Moroccan digital public by analyzing the language, symbols, and narratives used to demand accountability.

## Research Design: Multiple Case Study Analysis

The core of the methodology is a *Multiple Case Study (MCS)* design (Yin 55). The selection of cases was driven by the logic of "theoretical sampling" rather than statistical representativeness. We selected three high-profile accountability episodes from the doctoral corpus (2022–2025) that represent the three distinct "pillars of affect" identified in our theory:

1. *Case A (Humanitarian Grief): The Rayan Aourram Tragedy (February 2022).*
    - *Context:* A five-year-old boy fell into a well, triggering a global rescue operation.
    - *Relevance:* This case represents the perceived moral violation of "Humanitarian Ethics." It allows us to analyze how the public polices the boundary between "information" and "spectacle" during a crisis.
2. *Case B (National Identity): The "Divided Map" Controversy (July 2025).*
    - *Context:* A national sports broadcaster aired a Moroccan map omitting the Sahara.
    - *Relevance:* This case represents the perceived moral violation of "National Sovereignty." It illuminates how nationalism serves as a hyper-potent trigger for accountability, uniting diverse factions.
3. *Case C (Cultural Respect): The Hassan Mikyat / Mchiti Fiha Backlash (Ramadan 2023).*
    - *Context:* A veteran actor was bullied on a comedy show; simultaneously, a hidden camera show was accused of banality.
    - *Relevance:* This case represents the perceived moral violation of "Cultural Dignity." It explores the public's role in defending traditional hierarchies of respect against the perceived vulgarity of modern entertainment.

## Data Collection: The Digital Archive

For each case, a "Digital Data Corpus" was assembled. The data collection was retrospective and non-participant, treating social media platforms as a living archive of public sentiment.

- *Platforms*: Data was harvested from Facebook (the primary public square in Morocco), YouTube (the locus of visual debate and commentary), and X/Twitter (the space for elite/journalist interaction).
- *Sampling Strategy:* We employed a "*Critical Instance Sampling*" strategy. Rather than scraping all comments (which produces noise), we focused on "high-engagement nodes."
    - *Primary Nodes:* The original posts containing the perceived media transgression (e.g., the YouTube video of the comedy sketch).
    - *Secondary Nodes:* Viral reaction posts from influencers or opinion leaders that framed the debate.
    - *Tertiary Nodes:* The "most liked" or "top" comments on these posts, as these represent the sentiments that achieved community consensus.
- *Volume*: The final dataset for this article comprises approximately *1,200 unique user comments* across the three cases, selected for their substantive content (excluding spam or monosyllabic reactions). Episodes referenced elsewhere in the article that fall outside these three cases—most notably the Ghita Asfour privacy incident discussed in Section 5—are treated as illustrative context and were not part of this systematically coded corpus.

## Data Analysis: Constructivist Thematic Analysis

The data was analyzed using *Constructivist Thematic Analysis* (Braun and Clarke 79). This approach acknowledges that the researchers are not discovering a pre-existing truth but actively interpreting the meaning constructed by participants. The analysis proceeded in three recursive stages:

*Phase 1: Open Coding for Affect (The "Feeling" Layer)*

We began by coding for emotional tone. Using MAXQDA software, we tagged comments with affective markers: **Anger, Shame, Pride, Disgust, Pity, Mockery**.

- Example: A comment on the Rayan case reading "Have you no shame turning this tragedy into a spectacle?" was coded as [Affect: Disgust] and [Affect: Moral Indignation].

*Phase 2: Axial Coding for Moral Values (The "Value" Layer)*

We then grouped these emotional codes into broader categories of perceived moral violation. We asked: *What specific value is being defended here?*

- The previous comment was re-coded under the category [Value: Sanctity of Life] and [Perceived Moral Violation: Symbolic Exploitation of Suffering].

- Example: Comments on the Divided Map case using terms like "Red Line" or "Betrayal" were grouped under [Value: Territorial Integrity].

*Phase 3: Selective Coding for Accountability Mechanisms (The "Action" Layer)*

Finally, we analyzed how these feelings and values were translated into demands for action. We looked for the specific vocabulary of accountability.

- *Keywords identified:* "Apology" (Itidhar), "Resignation" (Istiqala), "Boycott" (Muqata'a), "Punishment" (Iqab), "HACA" (referencing the regulator).

## Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

Researching digital affect requires navigating complex ethical terrain. While the data is publicly available, we adhered to the principle of "contextual integrity" (Nissenbaum 127).

- *Anonymization*: All direct quotes from private individuals (non-public figures) have been anonymized (Marwick and Boyd 122). Usernames are replaced with generic descriptors (e.g., "User A, Facebook").
- *Translation*: The original comments were largely in Darija (Moroccan Arabic)—increasingly used as a written medium on social media (Zakhir 100)—Modern Standard Arabic, or French. The authors, both native speakers, performed the translations. We employed a "semantic translation" approach, prioritizing the emotional weight and cultural connotation of terms over literal word-for-word accuracy. For instance, the Darija term *Hgra* is translated not just as "injustice" but as "humiliation/oppression by the powerful," preserving its specific affective resonance in the Moroccan context.

- *Positionality:* As Moroccan researchers, we possess the "cultural competence" necessary to decode the nuances of Darija satire, religious references, and implicit political signaling. However, we maintained reflexive distance by constantly challenging our own assumptions about "national consensus," deliberately seeking out dissenting voices (counter-publics) within the data to ensure the analysis did not merely replicate dominant narratives.
- Ethical Review: This study analyzed exclusively publicly accessible, user-generated content and involved no recruitment, intervention, or direct interaction with human participants. Consequently, observational analysis of this nature does not fall under the mandatory review remit of the institutional ethics committee at Ibn Tofaïl University. Given the sensitivity of the material—which includes content connected to the death of a child and identifiable public figures—the authors strictly applied the principle of contextual integrity (Nissenbaum 127). Specifically, no private or restricted accounts were accessed, all non-public individuals were anonymized, and user comments were paraphrased rather than quoted verbatim to prevent re-identification. Public figures are discussed solely in relation to material they voluntarily made public or that was already the subject of widespread public debate.

### Limitations of the Methodology

This methodological approach privileges the vocal and the visible. It captures the sentiments of those with digital access and the inclination to comment, potentially excluding the "silent majority" or those who fear state surveillance. Furthermore, relying on "top comments" (which are algorithmically sorted) inevitably highlights majoritarian views while perhaps obscuring minority perspectives. We mitigate this by acknowledging that we are mapping the *dominant* Moral Economy of the digital sphere, not necessarily the statistical public opinion of the entire nation.

By rigorously applying this thematic lens to the raw emotion of the comment section, this methodology allows us to move beyond anecdotal observation. It enables us to dissect the anatomy of digital outrage, revealing the specific moral wiring that connects a Facebook post to a national scandal.

## Analysis: The Three Pillars of Affective Accountability

The empirical heart of this study lies in dissecting the specific emotional triggers that transform passive digital audiences into active sanctioning bodies. Through the thematic analysis of user-generated content across our selected case studies, we identify three distinct "Pillars of Affect" that uphold the Moral Economy of the Moroccan digital sphere: *Humanitarian Grief*, *National Pride,* and *Cultural Dignity*. In each pillar, we observe a consistent trajectory: a perceived media transgression creates an "affective rupture" (a perceived moral violation of shared feeling), which galvanizes a "public of outrage," leading to specific demands for restoration.

### Pillar 1: Humanitarian Grief and the Sanctity of Death

The first pillar reveals how the digital public polices the boundaries of human dignity, particularly in moments of collective trauma. The case of Rayan Aourram (Case 1), the five-year-old boy trapped in a well in February 2022, serves as the paradigm. For five days, the world watched via live streams as rescue efforts unfolded. However, parallel to the prayers and solidarity, a fierce counter-narrative emerged targeting the media's conduct.

### *The Transgression: "Grief Mining" as Perceived Moral Violation*

The analysis of YouTube and Facebook comments reveals that the primary grievance was not informational inaccuracy, but emotional exploitation. Users perceived the relentless, 24/7 live coverage—often featuring zoomed-in shots of the weeping family or the dark well—as a perceived moral violation of the sanctity of suffering.

The term *Tijara* (Trade/Commerce) appeared repeatedly in the dataset. Users accused media outlets and influencers of "trading in tragedy." One highly engaged comment on a Chouf TV live stream crystallized this sentiment:

> "Fear God for us and for the child's family. You have turned a tragedy into a spectacle (Furja) and a race for views. This is not journalism; this is trading in tragedies." (Comment 1, Appendix E)

Here, the affect is *Disgust.* The use of the word *Furja* (Spectacle) is damning; it implies that the media has reduced a life-or-death struggle into entertainment. By invoking God ("Fear God"), the user elevates the critique from professional ethics to religious morality. The perceived transgression is not framed as bad journalism; it is framed as Haram (sinful).

### *The Mechanism: Shaming as Regulation*

Lacking formal power to stop the broadcasts, the digital public weaponized *Shame* (*Hshouma*). Comments functioned as a direct shaming ritual.

> "Have you no shame? (Wash ma 3ndkom wjh?) Zooming in on a mother's tears for likes? Delete this immediately."

This collective shaming forced a tangible shift. As the negative sentiment peaked (visible in the ratio of angry reactions to likes), several digital outlets began to disable comments or pull back their cameras. The "affective public" successfully imposed a "cordon sanitaire" around the event, enforcing a moral standard that the professional code of ethics had failed to preempt. This case demonstrates that in the absence of effective state regulation of digital ethics, the *emotional* regulation of the crowd serves as the primary check on sensationalism.

## Pillar 2: National Identity and the Defense of Sovereignty

If the first pillar is driven by universal humanism, the second is driven by fierce particularism. In the "Divided Map" controversy, we observe how **National Pride** serves as a high-voltage trigger for accountability. In these instances, the media entity is perceived not just as unethical, but as *traitorous* or *anti-national*.

### *The Transgression: The Symbolic Erasure*

In July 2025, when the national sports broadcaster *Arryadia* aired a promotional video for the WAFCON featuring a map of Morocco without its Southern Provinces, the reaction was instantaneous. The error was technical—a feed relay from the Confederation of African Football (CAF)—but the interpretation was symbolic.

The thematic analysis shows that users immediately framed this as an assault on **Sovereignty**. The keywords dominating the discourse were not "mistake" or "error," but "Red Line" (*Khat Ahmar*), "Betrayal" (*Khiyana*), and "Insult" (*Ihana*).

> "This is a red line. How can a national channel not know its own borders? This is an unforgivable insult to our territorial integrity." (Synthesis of comments, Appendix L)

### *The Mechanism: The Patriot's Veto*

The affect here is *Righteous Anger* (*Ghadab*). This anger is exceptionally powerful because it aligns the public with the state. Unlike Western contexts where accountability often pits the public *against* the state, here the public acts as the vanguard of state ideology.
This illustrates a "Patriot's Veto." The affective intensity of nationalism is so high that it overrides other values like press freedom or the right to inquire. The public demands that the state intervene to punish the media for being "unpatriotic." The speed of the institutional response—Arryadia apologized within hours—demonstrates that institutions are terrified of this nationalist affect. They know that failing to align with the "patriotic mob" poses a risk to their own legitimacy.

## Pillar 3: Cultural Dignity and the Rejection of "Banality"

The third pillar is perhaps the most sociological. It involves the defense of *Cultural Dignity* against what is perceived as the "banality" (*Tafaha*) of modern entertainment. This was vividly displayed in the backlash against the *Mchiti Fiha* hidden camera show and the bullying of veteran actor Hassan Mikyat.

### *The Transgression: The Perceived Moral Violation of Hierarchy*

In the Hassan Mikyat case, a young comedian on a state TV show mocked the veteran actor's appearance. The digital uproar was driven by a perceived moral violation of *Hierarchy* and *Respect* (*Waqar*). In Moroccan culture, respect for elders and established figures is a core value. The young comedian's "joke" was decoded by the digital public not as comedy, but as *Hgra*—a complex Darija term implying humiliation, injustice, and the abuse of the weak by the strong.

> "This is the level of our media? Mocking a legend of Moroccan comedy? This is Hgra. We demand respect for our artists." (Synthesis of comments, Appendix H)

Similarly, the critique of *Mchiti Fiha* was framed around the concept of *Tafaha* (triviality/banality). Users expressed *Shame* that public funds were being used to produce content they viewed as "insulting to the intelligence" of the Moroccan family.

> *"We deserve better than this banality in Ramadan. You are laughing at us, not with us."* (Comment 1, Appendix G)

### *The Mechanism: Cultural Elitism as Resistance*

Here, the affect is *Contempt* mixed with *Cultural Anxiety*. The digital public positions itself as the guardian of "authentic" Moroccan culture against the encroaching vulgarity of commercial television. By demanding accountability, the public is performing an act of cultural distinction. They are saying: *We are sophisticated; we demand quality; we reject this trash.*

Interestingly, this is where the "Viewership Paradox" emerges. While the digital elite (on Facebook and YouTube) expressed contempt and demanded cancellation, the shows remained rating hits. This suggests that the "Affective Public" in this pillar represents a specific class fraction—the educated, digitally literate youth—waging a culture war against the populist programming strategies of state television. Their weapon is "cultural shaming," demanding that the media reflect the *idealized* self of the nation, not its *consumed* reality.

## Discussion: The Power and Peril of the Affective Public

Synthesizing these three pillars, we can now theorize the broader implications of the "Affective Public Sphere" for media accountability in the MENA region. Our findings suggest that emotion is not merely a reaction to media content; it is the structural condition of accountability itself. However, this model operates with specific constraints and exclusions that challenge the techno-optimist narrative of "digital democracy."

### The "Value-Trigger" Hypothesis

The most significant theoretical insight derived from this analysis is what we term the **"***Value-Trigger Hypothesis***."** In established Western democracies, media accountability is often continuous and procedural. A press council monitors standards; an ombudsman reviews complaints. In the hybrid regime of Morocco, our data shows that the "Public Frame" of accountability is *discontinuous and dormant*. It does not exist as a steady state.
It is only activated—"triggered"—when a perceived media transgression intersects with a deeply held, non-negotiable *Shared Value*.

- If a journalist makes a factual error about tax policy, the reaction is likely minimal (low affect).
- If a journalist makes an error about the map of Morocco (high affect/Nationalism), the reaction is explosive.
- If a TV show is boring, it is ignored. If it is "insulting" to a cultural icon (high affect/Dignity), it triggers a campaign.

This means that accountability in the MENA region is *unevenly distributed*. Issues that generate high affect (religion, nation, death, dignity) are subject to intense, almost vigilante-like scrutiny. Issues that are technocratic, complex, or lack emotional resonance (e.g., corruption in municipal procurement, media ownership transparency) often fail to trigger the "affective public." Consequently, the media is highly accountable for *symbolic* transgressions but may remain unaccountable for *systemic* or *political-economic* failures, simply because those failures do not generate the necessary viral heat.

### The Exclusionary Consensus: The Spiral of Silence

The second major implication concerns the nature of the consensus produced by these affective publics. In the Habermasian model, consensus is the result of debate. In the Affective model, consensus is often the prerequisite for mobilization.

Our analysis of the Divided Map controversy reveals how this dynamic functions to suppress dissent. Once the narrative was framed as a "Betrayal" (Khiyana) and a perceived moral violation of "Red Lines," the scope for alternative interpretations vanished. The affective intensity of the swarm creates a powerful Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann 43). In this environment, suggesting that the map omission was a technical error rather than a calculated insult became socially costly. The "Patriot's Veto" overrides other values, ensuring that the only acceptable public stance is outrage and effectively silencing calls for nuance or technical inquiry. This suggests that while the Affective Public is powerful, it is also majoritarian and exclusionary. It excels at enforcing dominant norms—such as territorial integrity—but is often hostile to minority viewpoints or counter-narratives that challenge those norms.

A further episode that sits outside the three-case corpus—the Ghita Asfour privacy incident—is instructive here as illustrative context rather than systematically coded evidence. While the public successfully mobilized against the media's invasion of her privacy (a "dignity"

trigger), the discourse was also laced with moral policing of her lifestyle. The same affective energy that punished the media for "eating her flesh" (exploiting her) also scrutinized her behavior.

This duality reveals the danger: the "digital street" is not a liberal guarantor of rights; it is a conservative guardian of norms. It holds the media accountable not to abstract principles of "freedom," but to the community's specific, and often conservative, moral code.

### The State as Beneficiary: Weaponized Accountability

Finally, we must address the political utility of this affective accountability. In a hybrid regime, the state often watches the "digital street" closely. Our analysis suggests that the state frequently co-opts these affective mobilizations to discipline the press without appearing authoritarian.

When the digital crowd mobilized against the Divided Map error, framing it as a betrayal of sovereignty, they actively invited the state to intervene. By validating this public anger, the state reinforces the "red lines" surrounding territorial integrity without needing to resort to censorship itself. The public effectively acts as a "vigilante" force, viewing the state as the ultimate guardian of the moral order.

This creates a paradox: bottom-up affective accountability often strengthens top-down control. The public demands "respect" and "responsibility," and the authoritarian state provides it by tightening the leash on the media. The "Affective Public Sphere," therefore, does not necessarily lead to democratization; it can function as a populist feedback loop that reinforces the status quo, punishing only those media outlets that step outside the permitted consensus of the "Nation" and the "Faith."

## Conclusion

This article began by challenging the applicability of the rational-critical public sphere to the MENA region. Through the analysis of high-profile media scandals in Morocco, we have demonstrated that accountability is not a function of policy debate, but of **affective mobilization**. It is driven by a **Moral Economy** that fiercely protects the sacred values of the community: the dignity of the grieving, the sovereignty of the land, and the respect due to cultural hierarchy.

For media scholars, this implies a necessary shift in focus. We must stop looking for "deliberation" in the comments section and start analyzing "sentiment." We must recognize that in the Global South, emotion is not "noise" to be filtered out; it is the essential *signal* of democratic demand. It is the mechanism through which the voiceless reclaim agency, asserting their right to be respected, if not fully heard.

However, for practitioners and activists, the findings offer a warning. An accountability system driven solely by affect is volatile, uneven, and easily co-opted. It punishes the symbolic error while often ignoring the systemic rot. The challenge for the future of the MENA digital sphere is not to suppress this emotion—which is the source of its vitality—but to harness it. The goal must be to build bridges that translate this raw, explosive affect into sustained, structural demands for a freer and more responsible media, ensuring that the "digital street" becomes a force for justice, not just a mechanism for venting.

## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

*CAF*
Confederation of African Football
*DS*
Digital Sphere (used conceptually to refer to online public spaces)
*HACA*
*Haute Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle* (Moroccan High Authority for Audiovisual Communication)
*MCS*
Multiple Case Study
*MENA*
Middle East and North Africa
*NGO*
Non-Governmental Organization
*UGC*
User-Generated Content
*WAFCON*
Women's Africa Cup of Nations
*X (formerly Twitter)*
Social media platform used for elite and journalistic interaction

## Key Cultural and Linguistic Terms

*Darija*
Moroccan Arabic vernacular
*Furja*
(Darija) Spectacle; entertainment derived from others' suffering
*Ghadab*
(Arabic/Darija) Anger
*Hgra*
(Darija) Humiliation, oppression, or abuse of power against the weak
*Hshouma*
(Darija) Shame; moral embarrassment used as social sanction
*Ihana*
(Arabic) Insult
*Istiqala*
(Arabic) Resignation
*Itidhar*
(Arabic) Apology
*Khat Ahmar*
(Arabic/Darija) Red line (non-negotiable boundary)
*Muqata'a*
(Arabic) Boycott
*Tafaha*
(Arabic/Darija) Triviality; banality
*Tijara*
(Arabic/Darija) Trade; commerce (used metaphorically as "profiting from tragedy")
*Waqar*
(Arabic) Dignity; respect associated with age or status

## Works Cited


Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2004.

Ait Hattani, Hanae. "New Media and Civic Participation in Morocco." *Journal of Media Research – Revista de Studii Media*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2017, pp. 5–25. https://doi.org/10.24193/jmr.29.1.

Aouragh, Miriyam. "Social Media, Mediation and the Arab Revolutions." *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, pp. 518–36. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v10i2.416.

Benchenna, Abdelfattah, and Dominique Marchetti. "Writing between the 'Red Lines': Morocco's Digital Media Landscape." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2021, pp. 664–81. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720972316.

Bennett, W. Lance, and Alexandra Segerberg. "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2012, pp. 739–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2006, pp. 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Bruns, Axel. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*. Peter Lang, 2008.

Castells, Manuel. *Communication Power*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2013.

Curran, James, and Myung-Jin Park, editors. *De-Westernizing Media Studies*. Routledge, 2000.

Elboukhari, Brahim. *Social Media in Morocco: An Instrument of Media Accountability*. 2026. Ibn Tofaïl University, PhD dissertation.

El Kadoussi, Abdelmalek. "The Perception of Self-Censorship among Moroccan Journalists." *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2022, pp. 231–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2020.1771310.

Fassin, Didier. *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Translated by Rachel Gomme, U of California P, 2012.

Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*, nos. 25–26, 1990, pp. 56–80. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/466240.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, MIT Press, 1989.

Highfield, Tim. "News via Voldemort: Parody Accounts in Topical Discussions on Twitter." *New Media & Society*, vol. 18, no. 9, 2016, pp. 2028–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815576703.

Ibahrine, Mohammed, and Bouziane Zaid. "Morocco: Accountability at a Nascent Stage." *The Global Handbook of Media Accountability*, edited by Tobias Eberwein et al., Routledge, 2021, pp. 247–55. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429326943-28.

Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge UP, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781353.

Marwick, Alice E., and Danah Boyd. "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience." *New Media & Society*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, pp. 114–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313.

Nissenbaum, Helen. *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life*. Stanford UP, 2010.

Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. "The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion." *Journal of Communication*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1974, pp. 43–51. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x.

Papacharissi, Zizi. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford UP, 2015.

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. "Morocco." *Digital News Report 2025*, University of Oxford, 2025, reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2025/morocco.

Salvatore, Armando, and Dale F. Eickelman, editors. *Public Islam and the Common Good*. Brill, 2004.

Thompson, E. P. "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." *Past & Present*, no. 50, 1971, pp. 76–136. https://doi.org/10.1093/past/50.1.76.

Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. 6th ed., Sage, 2018.

Zaid, Bouziane, and Mohammed Ibahrine. "Morocco: Competitive Authoritarianism in Media Reforms." *Arab Media Systems*, edited by Carola Richter and Claudia Kozman, Open Book Publishers, 2021, pp. 303–22. https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0238.18.

Zaid, Bouziane, et al. "Watching the Watchdogs: A Conceptual Model for Media Accountability in a Non-Western Country." *Journalism Practice*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2023, pp. 755–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1946416.

Zakhir, Marouane. "New Media of Communication and Language Shift in Morocco." *International Arab Journal of English for Specific Purposes*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2018, pp. 98–104.

## Appendix: The Affective Data Corpus

This appendix presents a sample of the user-generated content (UGC) analyzed in this study. The data is organized not by case, but by the **Pillar of Affect** (Humanitarianism, Nationalism, Dignity) to illustrate the shared moral vocabulary used by the public across different events.
*Note: All comments were originally posted in Moroccan Darija, Arabic, or French. Translations are by the authors, emphasizing semantic and emotional equivalence.*

**Table A1: Pillar 1 – Humanitarian Grief (The Sanctity of Life)**

*Source Case: The Rayan Aourram Tragedy (February 2022)*

| Platform | Original Sentiment (Translated) | Affective Code | Perceived Moral Violation Identified |
|---|---|---|---|
| **YouTube (Live Stream)** | *"Fear God for us and for the child's family. You have turned a tragedy into a spectacle (Furja) and a race for views. This is not journalism; this is trading in tragedies."* | Disgust, Righteousness | Commercial Exploitation: Perceived commodification of suffering. |
| **Facebook** | *"Have you no face (Wash ma 3ndkom wjh)? Zooming in on a mother's tears for likes? Delete this immediately."* | Shame (*Hshouma*) | **Privacy/Dignity**: Perceived Violating the sanctity of grief. |
| **Twitter/X** | *"If he were a rich man's son, you would see the latest equipment. But Rayan is the son of the people; for him and for us, God is our only help."* | Despair, Class Resentment | **Inequality**: Systemic neglect of the poor. |
| **Facebook** | *"We are praying, you are counting views. There is a special place in hell for this kind of 'press'."* | Religious Condemnation | **Immorality**: Perceived spiritual violation. |

Source: Elboukhari, Brahim. *Social Media in Morocco: An Instrument of Media Accountability*. 2026. Ibn Tofaïl University, PhD dissertation.

**Table A2: Pillar 2 – National Identity (The Defense of Sovereignty)**

*Source Cases: The Divided Map (July 2025)*

| Platform | Original Sentiment (Translated) | Affective Code | Perceived Moral Violation Identified |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Twitter/X** | "This is a red line (Khat Ahmar). How can a national channel not know its own borders? This is an unforgivable insult to our territorial integrity." | Shock, Betrayal | **Treason:** Failing to protect national borders. |

Source: Elboukhari, Brahim. *Social Media in Morocco: An Instrument of Media Accountability*. 2026. Ibn Tofaïl University, PhD dissertation.

**Table A3: Pillar 3 – Cultural Dignity (Hierarchy and Respect)**

*Source Cases: Hassan Mikyat (March 2023) & Mchiti Fiha (Ramadan 2023)*

| Platform | Original Sentiment (Translated) | Affective Code | Perceived Moral Violation Identified |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Facebook** | *"This is the level of our media? Mocking a legend of Moroccan comedy? This is Hgra (Oppression). We demand respect for our artists."* | Pity, Indignation | **Hgra**: Humiliation of an elder/respected figure. |
| **YouTube** | *"We deserve better than this banality (Tafaha) in Ramadan. You are laughing at us, not with us. Public money is being wasted on trash."* | Contempt, Intellectual Superiority | **Banality**: Insulting the audience's intelligence. |
| **Instagram** | *"Stop normalizing bullying. Just because it's 'comedy' doesn't mean you can destroy a man's dignity on national TV."* | Moral Correction | **Bullying**: Normalization of harm. |
| **TikTok** | *"If you don't stop harassing us, tragedies will happen. [Reference to Ghita Asfour]."* | Fear, Warning | **Harassment**: Media intrusion causing physical danger. |

Source: Elboukhari, Brahim. *Social Media in Morocco: An Instrument of Media Accountability*. 2026. Ibn Tofaïl University, PhD dissertation.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Rival Frames: Moroccan and Algerian Media Framing of Morocco's Hosting of AFCON 2025

**Omar Kouiyache**
Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Tetouan, Morocco

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.9483

**Omar Kouiyache** is a PhD candidate at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tetouan, Morocco. He holds a Master's degree in Media Studies from the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies in Qatar. He has participated in international conflict-related research conferences, namely at the Al Jazeera Center for Studies and the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. His research centers on media framing, cultural narratives, and identity formation, with a particular focus on how media frames shape public perceptions, collective memory, and sociopolitical discourses in North Africa and the Arab world.

omar.kouiyache@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3725-4598

Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 07-05-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Rival Frames: Moroccan and Algerian Media Framing of Morocco's Hosting of AFCON 2025

**Omar Kouiyache**
Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Tetouan, Morocco

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how *Morocco World News* and *El Watan* framed Morocco's hosting of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON 2025), with the objective of examining how regional rivalry shapes media narratives surrounding a major sporting event. Methodologically, the research employs qualitative textual analysis of a corpus of 25 articles published during the two-month period following 20 December 2025, with relevant excerpts from *El Watan* translated from French into English for the purposes of analysis and citation. The findings reveal two contrasting framing structures: *Morocco World News* constructs Morocco as a legitimate, internationally recognized host, emphasizing organizational success, soft power projection, and resilience against unfair criticism, while *El Watan* portrays Morocco as a manipulative political actor projecting an artificial image of progress over a society marked by internal tensions. These opposing representations demonstrate how the same event can generate radically divergent narratives shaped by geopolitical context, with both outlets relying on selective sourcing and evaluative language to produce polarized portrayals that extend beyond sport into broader questions of legitimacy and regional power. This study ultimately highlights the role of media framing in constructing national image and reinforcing political tensions within the Maghreb.

## KEYWORDS

**Media Framing**

**AFCON 2025**

**Morocco**

**Algeria**

**Soft Power**

## Introduction

International sporting events are highly visible arenas where nations project identity to global audiences, functioning as sites of symbolic politics and diplomatic signaling (Grix and Lee 536; Black 262). Media coverage transforms these moments into narratives about national competence and geopolitical standing (Vincent and Kian 307; Walsh and Wiedmann 154). Football carries particular weight in Africa, making AFCON 2025 a major symbolic and geopolitical event (Alegi 111). Hosting offers Morocco visibility and self-representation, but also exposes it to scrutiny shaped by regional rivalries rather than domestic media alone (Knott and Tinaz 3).

This study conducts a comparative framing analysis of *Morocco World News* and *El Watan* during the two months following 20 December 2025, examining how Morocco's hosting is constructed within two media contexts shaped by longstanding rivalry (Entman, "Framing" 7). The outlets were chosen for their ideological divergence, making them productive sites for comparing how the same event is framed across rival contexts. Two questions guide the study:

Contact ✉ omar.kouiyache@etu.uae.ac.ma
©2026

(1) What dominant frames do *Morocco World News* and *El Watan* use to construct Morocco's hosting? (2) How do these patterns reflect the Morocco-Algeria rivalry?

Existing scholarship on mega-event framing has focused mainly on hosts projecting image outward, with little attention to how a rival state frames the same event. This study addresses that gap, making two contributions: a mirror framing model describing how rival outlets use symmetrical strategies while inverting moral and political valence; and an extension of soft power frameworks beyond host-audience dynamics to adversarial coverage.

## Literature Review

### Sport Mega-Events and Nation Branding

Sport mega-events function as platforms through which states project national identity, modernity, and legitimacy. Scholars have formalized this under the "geopolitical economy of sport," arguing that hosting decisions, investment flows, and media narratives are increasingly inseparable from state power and international positioning (Chaib and Anagnostopoulos 2). In Africa specifically, continental tournaments have become sites of competing bids for regional leadership, with hosting states deploying sport as a vehicle for developmental legitimacy (Grix and Lee 527). Hosting allows governments to communicate competence, stability, and development to domestic and external audiences (Grix and Lee 7–8), positioning these events as mediated spectacles embedded in nation branding and soft power (Næss 2).

This symbolic capital, however, depends on media representation: nation-branding success hinges not just on staging the event but on how media frame it (Alhassan 105). Coverage of the Olympics and World Cup routinely extends beyond sport into governance, economic performance, and political legitimacy (Alshikhy et al. 1–2), reinforcing state narratives of progress or, alternatively, foregrounding mismanagement and instability. Mega-events thus become sites where national image is constructed and contested (Alhassan 80).

The Africa Cup of Nations carries particular symbolic weight in this regard, offering hosts a chance to assert regional leadership and institutional capacity (Cleland 18) while inviting scrutiny from neighboring states whose interpretations are shaped by regional rivalry. This underscores the need to examine how hosting is framed not only domestically, but within proximate geopolitical contexts.

### Moroccan–Algerian Relations and Regional Rivalry

Morocco's hosting of AFCON 2025 must be situated within Moroccan-Algerian relations, marked since independence by tension, competition, and unresolved territorial disputes (Sour 10). The 1963 Sand War embedded early mistrust, and subsequent decades saw recurring strain centered on the Sahara conflict (Sour 13), with relations fluctuating between engagement and rupture, including the 1994 border closure and the 2021 suspension of diplomatic ties (Fabiani 208). Both states compete for regional leadership through continental institutions and diplomatic networks (Baida 56).

Sport has periodically intersected with this rivalry: football carries strong national symbolism in both countries, with matches historically charged with political meaning (Tchier), and hosting a major tournament thus acquires symbolic significance beyond its athletic dimension (Beissel and Kohe 594).

AFCON 2025 unfolds against this backdrop of diplomatic tension (Kayssi and Zarhloule). Morocco's hosting may be read as an assertion of regional influence, while for Algeria the tournament may intersect with existing narratives of leadership and legitimacy in North Africa,

providing essential context for understanding its significance within the Maghrebi media landscape.

### Sport, Media, and Maghrebi Geopolitics

Sport in North Africa is inseparable from regional politics, as athletic competition often reproduces geopolitical rivalries (Mirzayeva 118). Football has long served as a vehicle for national identity and inter-state tension management in the Maghreb (Fedele 11). Media actively construct and amplify rivalries: hosting offers governments soft power, while rival media may undermine the host's symbolic gains, an asymmetry that makes Maghrebi coverage of AFCON 2025 analytically productive (Mauro 936).

The Morocco-Algeria rivalry supplies this context. Territorial disputes have long undermined cooperation, evident in the Arab Maghreb League's dysfunction since 1989, entangling diplomacy with sport since 2021, as when Algeria denied entry to Moroccan journalists covering the 2022 Mediterranean Games (Čizmić). Football has historically been a space for settling political scores, and Algeria's World Cup performances were instrumentalized by the Bouteflika regime as evidence of regime legitimacy (Amara and Bouandel 740). Algeria has positioned Morocco as a "functional other" sustaining its self-definition, meaning coverage of Moroccan achievements is unlikely to be merely descriptive (Roudani).

Existing work on Moroccan sporting identity has focused on Western media rather than intra-regional coverage, with football diplomacy instrumentalizing sporting success as soft power since Qatar 2022. Moroccan and Algerian media share a linguistic space yet diverge politically, making their framing choices central to this study.

### Press Systems in Algeria and Morocco

Both press systems emerged from post-independence state-building that positioned media as instruments of national consolidation rather than independent watchdogs. Algeria's press liberalized after 1989, dismantling the FLN monopoly and enabling independent papers like *El Watan* (founded 1990), though ownership concentration and state-linked advertising still constrain editorial independence (Ben Fatta et al. 1090–1091). Morocco's landscape similarly combines state broadcasting with a nominally independent press under the 2002 Press Code, which permits prosecution for content threatening public order or the monarchy; self-censorship on topics like Western Sahara is well documented, though outward-facing outlets like *Morocco World News* operate with greater latitude on foreign affairs (Chafik and Iharchane 8–9).

These asymmetries matter: El Watan's adversarial coverage may reflect the relative openness Algerian papers have toward external targets, while Morocco World News's promotional framing reflects its dependence on Morocco's international visibility.

## Theoretical Framework

### Framing Theory

This study is grounded in framing theory, which posits that news discourse does not simply reflect reality but actively organizes it through selection, emphasis, and exclusion (Entman, "Framing" 7). By making certain aspects of an event more salient than others, frames guide audiences toward particular interpretations (Boswell et al. 2), shaping how issues are defined, which actors are legitimized or criticized, and what evaluative tone underlies the narrative.

Framing operates at multiple levels: textually, through headlines, lexical choices, and source selection (Entman, "Framing" 7); discursively, by connecting events to broader narratives of national identity and geopolitical positioning; and contextually, shaped by political environment

and historical relations between states (Klein and Amis 1325). Comparative framing analysis assumes different national media contexts will generate distinct narratives about the same event, reflecting their respective political cultures and strategic interests (Kouiyache and Badad 101-02).

For AFCON 2025, framing theory provides a systematic basis for examining how Morocco's hosting is constructed within Moroccan and Algerian coverage, focusing on themes of organization, security, regional leadership, and symbolic nationhood. Entman's four functions (problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation) served as a sensitizing lens rather than a generative coding scheme: they informed the analytical vocabulary without predetermining the categories applied. Frames were derived inductively from the corpus, with Entman's functions drawn upon descriptively, post hoc, to articulate what those frames were doing.

### Soft Power, Nation Branding, and Identity Construction

Framing theory alone does not capture the broader ideological and geopolitical stakes of AFCON 2025 coverage. This study draws on four additional frameworks. Nye's soft power describes a state's capacity to attract influence through cultural appeal and institutional credibility rather than coercion, with mega-event hosting widely theorized as a soft power instrument (Nye 11), informing the analysis of *Morocco World News*'s coverage as state communication strategy. Anholt's competitive identity extends this, arguing national image is actively managed through symbolic communication (Anholt 25, 78); this applies to both outlets, as *Morocco World News* engages in affirmative brand-building while *El Watan* counter-frames against it. Anderson's imagined communities holds that national identity is constructed through shared narratives circulated by media (Anderson 6), positioning both outlets as agents constructing national selfhood against a regional other. Finally, Said's Orientalism shows how representations of the non-Western other can encode assumptions of cultural deficiency or superficial modernity (Said 36, 59), informing *El Watan*'s portrayal of Morocco's modernity as a façade and *Morocco World News*'s counter-narrative against an imperial gaze.

Together, these frameworks provide the vocabulary to interpret not only how each outlet organizes coverage, but why those choices carry such weight. Hallin and Mancini's typology, used to contextualize framing, was developed for Western systems and has documented limitations in postcolonial contexts; this study uses it as a loose descriptive vocabulary rather than a classificatory system, acknowledging the limits of that fit.

## Methodology

### Qualitative Textual Analysis

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine how *Morocco World News* and *El Watan* constructed Morocco's hosting of AFCON 2025, identifying recurring patterns in language, emphasis, and narrative structure to reveal how each outlet positions Morocco as host (Tesch 4). Rather than seeking a single definitive interpretation, textual analysis explores a range of plausible meanings to uncover the political and ideological assumptions informing coverage (Altheide 288).

The study covers the two-month period from 20 December 2025 through 20 February 2026, capturing heightened media attention around the tournament's launch, progression, and aftermath. Articles were collected directly from the searchable archives of moroccoworldnews.com and elwatan.dz, with no external databases used. Searches combined

anchor terms ("AFCON 2025" OR "Africa Cup of Nations" OR "CAN 2025") with thematic terms via AND logic ("Morocco" AND "host," "organization," "infrastructure," "security," "diplomacy," "soft power," or "regional"), using equivalent French terms for *El Watan*.

A purposive sampling strategy applied three criteria: temporal spread across the full window, thematic breadth across organization, politics, infrastructure, and social context, and a mix of news reports, features, and opinion pieces. Articles were further filtered for evaluative or interpretive language, yielding 25 in total: 10 from *Morocco World News* (5 news reports, 3 features, and 2 opinion pieces) and 15 from *El Watan* (2 news reports and 13 opinion pieces), for a combined total of 7 news reports, 3 features, and 15 opinion pieces.

Analysis was inductive: frames emerged from close reading rather than a predefined scheme, assessed for thematic consistency and capacity to capture cross-outlet differences. Relative prevalence of each frame, by article count and column space, is indicated in the Results, though the analysis remains qualitative. Entman's four functions served as a post-hoc descriptive vocabulary, not a predetermined coding template.

## Media Outlets and Rationale

This study analyzes AFCON 2025 coverage through a comparative examination of *El Watan* and *Morocco World News*, selected for their ideological divergence and contrasting orientations. *El Watan* represents an Algerian perspective often shaped by regional political rivalry, while *Morocco World News*, an English-language outlet targeting international audiences, contributes to Morocco's external image-building.

The two outlets also differ in audience composition and structural incentives, which may independently explain framing divergences. *Morocco World News*'s English-language, international focus creates incentives to project a positive image regardless of rivalry, since its relevance depends on Morocco's visibility abroad. *El Watan*, serving a domestic Algerian readership, operates where critical coverage of a regional rival may be expected by its audience. This study treats audience structure as a competing explanation, engaged alongside the geopolitical rivalry thesis in the Discussion.

## Researcher Positionality

As a Moroccan researcher analyzing coverage of an event involving Morocco and Algeria, the author acknowledges that this national background may have shaped interpretive choices. Frames were derived inductively from textual evidence, with critical and celebratory narratives in both outlets treated with equal analytical scrutiny and no framing privileged on national or political grounds. While complete neutrality cannot be claimed in interpretive research, this study strove for fairness and transparency throughout.

## Translation Procedure

Since *El Watan* publishes primarily in French, all articles from that outlet were accessed and analyzed in the original French, with translations produced directly by the author, who holds full fluency in both languages; no automated translation tools were used. Evaluatively charged vocabulary lacking direct English equivalents is retained in French alongside its English rendering to preserve interpretive transparency. Formal back-translation was not performed, though sustained bilingual engagement with the original texts minimized the risk of semantic distortion. Readers seeking interpretive precision are encouraged to consult the original French sources, cited in full in the Works Cited.

## Results

### *El Watan*

Textual analysis of *El Watan* reveals three dominant frames: Morocco's Political Grip, Racial Contradictions, and Infrastructure as Façade. Across these, coverage employs evaluative language, political references, and selective sourcing to construct a critical narrative, using recurring lexical choices and strategic quotations to situate the tournament within broader debates over Morocco's regional influence and image.

### Morocco's Political Grip

One of the most prominent frames portrays Morocco as using political influence and institutional leverage to control outcomes within African football. Rather than depicting AFCON primarily as a sporting competition, *El Watan* frequently situates the tournament within a broader narrative of political maneuvering and power struggles inside the Confederation of African Football (CAF).

Articles repeatedly emphasize Morocco's alleged influence through key football officials, particularly Fouzi Lekjaa, president of the Moroccan Football Federation and CAF vice-president. This personalization of power positions Moroccan leadership as central to institutional manipulation. In the article "*CAF: Why a Moroccan Referee for the Third-Place Match?*" discussing arbitration decisions during the tournament, the newspaper claims that "the powerful Moroccan lobby within CAF is present everywhere in the organization of the competition" (Ouahib). The expression "powerful Moroccan lobby" suggests systematic influence rather than isolated incidents.

Similarly, the same article questions the neutrality of refereeing appointments, arguing that CAF made an unusual decision by maintaining "a Moroccan referee within the group officiating matches involving direct competitors" (Ouahib). Such framing implies structural favoritism and reinforces the perception that Morocco's role as host allowed it to shape institutional decisions.

The narrative becomes even more explicit in commentary analyzing disciplinary proceedings following controversial matches. In *"Morocco–Senegal Affair: The Honor of African Football at Stake"*, the newspaper claims that the tournament revealed "the total hold Morocco exercises within CAF institutions" (Ouahib). The wording "mainmise totale" frames Morocco not simply as influential but as dominating African football governance.

The language used throughout these articles is highly evaluative and often moralizing. Expressions such as "chantage," "manigances," and "abus d'influence" portray Morocco's conduct as unethical political behavior rather than legitimate sporting competition. These terms reinforce a broader geopolitical narrative in which Morocco is presented as strategically using sport to extend regional power.

Importantly, this frame frequently draws on references to institutional actors rather than only journalists' commentary. CAF disciplinary bodies, football federations, and administrative decisions are cited to give legitimacy to the claims. However, these sources are selectively interpreted to support the broader narrative of Moroccan interference. Through this approach, *El Watan* reframes sporting controversies as evidence of geopolitical rivalry within African football.

## Morocco's Racial Contradictions

A second prominent frame depicts Morocco as a society experiencing racial tension and hostility toward Sub-Saharan Africans. This narrative emerges particularly in coverage following Morocco's defeat in the tournament final, where social unrest is portrayed as revealing deeper societal contradictions.

The article *"After Morocco's Defeat in the AFCON Final: A Wave of Anti-Black Hate"* describes violent incidents targeting African migrants after the match. The report claims that "scenes of violence erupted outside the stadium in Rabat where angry supporters launched what resembled a real hunt for Black people regardless of nationality" (Berriah). The phrase "hunt for Black people" dramatizes the events and constructs a powerful image of collective hostility.

The article further reinforces this frame through direct quotations from witnesses and victims. One migrant quoted in the report recounts discrimination in everyday life, stating: "I called a ride through Indrive, and when the driver heard my accent he immediately hung up" (Berriah). Such testimonies personalize the narrative, transforming social tensions into lived experiences of exclusion.

Similarly, the article describes racist insults allegedly shouted in public spaces: "Go back home, dirty Blacks! Return to your desert!" (Berriah). By reproducing these statements verbatim, the newspaper foregrounds the severity of racial hostility while amplifying its emotional impact on readers.

In addition to eyewitness accounts, the article cites statements from civil society organizations. In another article, "*Moroccan Association for Human Rights: Denouncing Racism after the AFCON*" the Moroccan Association for Human Rights is quoted expressing "deep concern about the multiplication of hate campaigns and threats targeting migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa" (Berriah). The use of such sources lends institutional credibility to the narrative of widespread discrimination.

The tone of these articles is strongly condemnatory, often presenting racism as symptomatic of broader political dynamics. One commentary links these tensions to state discourse, arguing that "this medieval offensive against people of color is the consequence of a political strategy that fueled nationalist sentiment during the tournament" (Berriah). By attributing social hostility to political mobilization, the newspaper situates racism within a broader critique of Moroccan governance. Overall, this frame constructs Morocco not only as a problematic host of the tournament but also as a society struggling with internal contradictions between its international image and domestic realities.

## Infrastructure as Façade

A third recurring frame questions the authenticity of Morocco's modern image by portraying the country's sporting infrastructure as a superficial façade masking deeper problems. While several articles acknowledge the impressive stadiums and facilities used during AFCON, this recognition is often followed by critical commentary undermining their symbolic value.

One commentary, "*Commentary / CAF: Morocco Suffers Another Setback*" notes that "many observers admired the beautiful stadiums and excellent pitches throughout the competition" but immediately adds that the tournament ultimately exposed "the arrogance and political ambitions surrounding the Moroccan organization" (Berriah). The juxtaposition of praise and criticism constructs a narrative in which physical infrastructure cannot compensate for alleged institutional misconduct.

Similarly, another article, "CAN-2025 Is Ironically a Golden Opportunity for Algerian Soft Power" argues that Morocco invested heavily in projecting a modern image but failed to achieve

the expected sporting dominance. According to the report, "the hype built around the Moroccan team quickly dissipated, leaving behind an implacable reality" (Abderrahmane). Words used in the article such as "tapage" suggest that promotional narratives surrounding Morocco's success were exaggerated or artificially constructed.

This framing often appears alongside references to international perception. One commentary argues that Morocco has carefully cultivated an image of modernization, noting that "this carefully constructed image of modernity has convinced many foreigners" (Abderrahmane). However, the article claims that the events of the tournament revealed contradictions beneath this image.

The narrative culminates in a broader critique of Morocco's political strategy. One commentary suggests that the tournament demonstrated "the hypocrisy of a system that seeks to present itself as modern while relying on questionable practices behind the scenes" (Abderrahmane). The use of moral language such as "hypocrisy" reinforces the broader argumentative structure of the coverage.

Through this frame, AFCON becomes a symbolic moment where Morocco's national image is tested. The modern stadiums and large-scale investments associated with the tournament are acknowledged but ultimately reframed as tools of image management rather than genuine indicators of progress.

### *Morocco World News*

The qualitative textual analysis of *Morocco World News* coverage during AFCON 2025 reveals three dominant and interrelated frames: Africa's Benchmark Host, Soft Power Actor, and The Unfairly Criticized Host. Across these frames, the outlet consistently employs affirmative and assertive language, mobilizes institutional and international sources, and constructs a narrative of national competence, legitimacy, and continental leadership.

#### Africa's Benchmark Host

A central frame positions Morocco as setting a new standard for hosting major sporting events, emphasizing organizational excellence, infrastructural sophistication, and logistical precision. Coverage repeatedly constructs AFCON 2025 as a turning point not only for Morocco but for African football as a whole.

In "*Morocco's AFCON 2025: A Masterclass in Hosting Marred by Final-Act Mayhem*" (Benkhar), the tournament is described as "the gold standard, the most secure, most polished, and most professional in the tournament's storied history." Such superlative language elevates Morocco beyond a successful host to a benchmark against which future tournaments should be measured. The article further emphasizes material indicators of success, including "state of the art stadiums," "high speed TGVs," and "five star digs," constructing a narrative of modernity aligned with global (particularly European) standards.

This framing is reinforced through reliance on authoritative external validation. In "*AU Commission Acclaims Morocco's 'Exemplary' AFCON 2025 Organization*" (Faouzi), the African Union Commission praises Morocco's "professionalism" and "outstanding hospitality," while CAF's president describes the tournament as "the most successful edition in the tournament's history." These endorsements function as legitimizing devices, shifting the evaluation from national self-praise to internationally recognized achievement.

Similarly, infrastructure and logistics are framed as seamless and unprecedented. The same article highlights "nine state-of-the-art brand-new or upgraded stadiums," "high-speed rail lines," and "renovated airports and 5G networks," constructing a technologically advanced

image of the host nation. The absence of major incidents is also repeatedly emphasized, as Benkhar notes "no major incidents, no violence on the home front," reinforcing a narrative of control and efficiency.

Even moments of crisis are incorporated into this frame. In "*How Morocco's Security System Prevented AFCON's Final from Turning into Chaos*" (Kabbour), the focus is not on the disruption itself but on the response, described as "a measured response" where authorities "restored order and stopped the chaos from spreading." The emphasis on restraint and professionalism reframes potential failure into evidence of institutional strength.

Overall, this frame constructs Morocco as not merely a capable host, but as the new continental standard for large-scale sporting events, using evaluative language, infrastructure-focused descriptions, and external validation to reinforce this image.

### Soft Power Actor

A second dominant frame presents AFCON 2025 as part of a broader state strategy in which sport functions as an instrument of diplomacy, economic development, and global positioning. Here, Morocco is framed not just as an organizer, but as a calculated and forward-looking geopolitical actor.

In "*How Morocco Is Turning AFCON 2025 into a Soft Power Engine*" (Ben Gamra), published three days after the opening match, the tournament is explicitly conceptualized as "a tool of soft power, a way of gaining influence and increasing geopolitical credibility." This framing extends the meaning of the event beyond sport, embedding it within long-term national strategy. The article stresses that Morocco's investments are "not because of the AFCON, but as part of a broader national development strategy," reinforcing the idea of continuity and planning. That this framing appeared just three days after competitive play began is itself analytically significant: rather than reflecting an extended track record of organizational success over the course of the tournament, the soft power narrative was already fully formed in the opening days of competition. This suggests *Morocco World News*'s soft power framing functioned less as a retrospective assessment of hosting performance than as a discursive frame the outlet was prepared to deploy from the outset, positioning it as an active participant in national image-building rather than a neutral reporter of events as they unfolded.

The language used consistently highlights intentionality and vision. AFCON is described as "vision-driven, not event-driven," while infrastructure projects are framed as evidence that "the country did not wait for AFCON… to transform itself." Such phrasing positions Morocco as proactive rather than reactive, contrasting with narratives often associated with developing contexts.

Economic discourse plays a crucial role in this frame. In "*AFCON 2025: Morocco Saw 190% Spike in Visitor Spending During Tournament*" (Faouzi), quantitative data is mobilized to demonstrate impact: "cross-border transactions… jumping by over 190%," "€1.5 billion in direct revenue," and "more than 100,000 jobs." These figures function as objective indicators of success, reinforcing the narrative of economic competence and return on investment.
Similarly, "*Morocco's €1.5 Billion AFCON Revenue Covers 80% of 2030 World Cup Costs*" (Faouzi) frames the tournament as part of a larger trajectory, with revenues funding "80% of the infrastructure needed for the 2030 World Cup." The use of phrases such as "sovereign investment" and "we gained a decade of development in 24 months" constructs AFCON as a catalyst for accelerated modernization.

Institutional and expert voices further strengthen this frame. Government officials, CAF representatives, and international actors are frequently cited, creating an authoritative discourse. For example, the Tourism Minister describes the event as providing "exceptional international

visibility," while CAF data highlights "record-breaking digital success with 6.1 billion digital impressions."

Overall, this frame positions Morocco as a strategic actor leveraging sport for long-term geopolitical and economic gains, using data-driven arguments, policy-oriented language, and institutional sources to construct an image of calculated national advancement.

### The Unfairly Criticized Host

The third frame constructs Morocco as a nation subjected to unjust criticism, external hostility, or misrepresentation, while simultaneously emphasizing its resilience, legitimacy, and moral standing. This frame is particularly visible in moments of controversy.

In Benkhar's article, accusations of favoritism are dismissed as "baseless claims of a 'bought' path to glory," while foreign media are accused of "stoking frustration and waging a shadow war of psy-ops." This language delegitimizes criticism by framing it as irrational, politically motivated, or conspiratorial. The rhetorical question, "If Morocco could rig an AFCON, does that mean they scripted their 2022 World Cup semi-final run?", serves to undermine opposing narratives through reductio ad absurdum.

The same article constructs Morocco as dignified and principled, asserting that "Morocco emerges unbowed" and remains "a sanctuary of peace, guided by… hospitality, coexistence, and dignity." This moral positioning contrasts sharply with depictions of disruptive actors, such as Senegalese players who "walked off the field" or fans who "assaulted security personnel."

This defensive framing is also present in more theoretical language in Faouzi's article: "*AU Commission Acclaims Morocco's 'Exemplary' AFCON 2025 Organization*" where criticism is interpreted through a postcolonial lens. The article argues that skepticism toward Morocco reflects an "imperial gaze" that expects Africa to be associated with "chaos" and "failure." The statement that "what unsettles these observers is not mismanagement but its absence" reframes criticism as a reaction to Morocco's success rather than its shortcomings.

In "*How Morocco's Security System Prevented AFCON's Final from Turning into Chaos*" (Kabbour), external disorder is contrasted with internal control. While acknowledging that "football stopped" and tensions rose, the article emphasizes that Morocco "stopped it from becoming a full security collapse." The focus remains on competence under pressure, reinforcing resilience.

Even internal critique is incorporated in a controlled manner. In "*What Lessons Can We Draw from AFCON 2025?*" (Lamzouwaq), shortcomings are acknowledged, such as fan behavior or coaching decisions, but framed as opportunities for improvement rather than systemic failures. This maintains the overall positive narrative while allowing limited self-reflection.

Across these articles, tone plays a crucial role. Criticism is often countered with assertive, sometimes confrontational language, while Morocco is described in terms of dignity, stability, and legitimacy. Sources are selectively mobilized to reinforce this dichotomy, privileging institutional voices and dismissing opposing perspectives.

## Discussion

The findings of this study reveal two sharply contrasting media constructions of Morocco during AFCON 2025, reflecting broader patterns identified in the literature on media framing, nationalism, and international communication. In line with foundational work by Robert Entman, both *El Watan* and *Morocco World News* select, emphasize, and organize aspects of reality in ways that promote distinct interpretations of the same event (Entman, "Framing" 7).

However, the degree of polarization, evaluative tone, and narrative coherence observed here suggests that these frames are not merely journalistic choices, but are embedded within broader geopolitical and ideological contexts (Hallin and Mancini 67), which is a tendency the comparative media systems literature associates with high political parallelism, though that framework requires qualification when applied outside its original Western European scope (Voltmer 12).

The framing patterns identified in *El Watan* strongly align with literature on adversarial media systems and conflict-driven journalism. Studies in international media coverage demonstrate that media outlets operating within politically polarized environments tend to reproduce national geopolitical tensions in their reporting (Hallin and Mancini 89). The persistent portrayal of Morocco as exercising a "political grip" over African football reflects what scholars describe as strategic framing, where events are interpreted through power and conflict lenses rather than their primary domain, in this case sport (Entman, Projections 52; Hallin and Mancini 75).

The personalization of power around figures such as Fouzi Lekjaa is also consistent with findings in political communication research, which show that attributing institutional processes to individual actors simplifies complex systems and facilitates narratives of manipulation or control (Entman, Projections 49; Hallin and Mancini 78). This aligns with Entman's notion of framing as a process of defining problems and assigning responsibility (Entman, Projections 52). By repeatedly associating refereeing decisions and CAF governance with Moroccan actors, *El Watan* constructs a coherent narrative of systemic bias, even when evidence is indirect or selectively interpreted (Entman, "Framing" 24).

Moreover, the strong evaluative and moralizing language ("chantage," "abus d'influence") reflects what Teun A. van Dijk identifies as ideological discourse structures, where lexical choices reinforce in-group/out-group distinctions (van Dijk 33). In this case, Morocco is consistently positioned as an out-group actor engaging in illegitimate practices, which corresponds with broader research on media representations in contexts of regional rivalry (van Dijk 69; Hallin and Mancini 102).

The *Morocco's Racial Contradictions* frame similarly aligns with literature on event-driven amplification of social tensions. Scholars have shown that moments of crisis, particularly in highly visible international events, are often used to highlight underlying societal issues (Hall 87; Dayan and Katz 211). However, the intensity and generalization observed in *El Watan*'s coverage suggest a form of overextension, where isolated incidents are framed as indicative of systemic national characteristics (Cottle 45). While the inclusion of testimonies and civil society voices provides a veneer of credibility, the selective emphasis on extreme language "hunt for Black people" risks reinforcing sensationalist narratives rather than offering balanced analysis (Cottle 52).

This tendency is further evident in the *Infrastructure as Façade* frame, where Morocco's modern infrastructure is systematically undermined as a façade. This reflects what the literature terms counter-framing, a strategy used to neutralize positive representations by reinterpreting them as superficial or deceptive (Gamson 74). Similar patterns have been identified in studies of international event coverage, where rival media outlets challenge host nations' image-building efforts (Anholt 103). In this sense, AFCON 2025 becomes a symbolic battleground for competing narratives about modernity, legitimacy, and regional leadership (Anholt 119).

Overall, *El Watan*'s coverage is consistent with conflict-oriented framing models, but it also exhibits a high degree of narrative coherence that suggests an underlying ideological position. The convergence of political, social, and symbolic critiques indicates that sport is used as an entry point to articulate broader geopolitical tensions between Morocco and Algeria.

In contrast, *Morocco World News* demonstrates a framing strategy that closely aligns with literature on nation branding and soft power communication. As argued by Joseph Nye, states increasingly use cultural and sporting events to enhance their international image and influence (Nye 11). The depiction of AFCON 2025 as a "benchmark" event reflects this logic, positioning Morocco as a model of development and competence within Africa (Nye 54).

The emphasis on infrastructure, logistics, and international validation corresponds with what Simon Anholt describes as competitive identity construction, where nations seek to differentiate themselves through narratives of modernization and efficiency (Anholt 25). The repeated references to "state-of-the-art stadiums," "high-speed rail," and endorsements from institutions such as the African Union Commission and Confederation of African Football serve to externalize legitimacy, thereby strengthening the credibility of the narrative (Anholt 78).

Importantly, the use of quantitative data (e.g., revenue figures, digital impressions) reflects a technocratic framing style, which is often associated with development discourse (Escobar 4). By grounding claims in measurable outcomes, the coverage constructs an image of objectivity and rational planning (Escobar 56). However, as noted in critical media studies, such data-driven narratives can obscure underlying complexities or downplay negative aspects of events (Couldry and Hepp 112).

The *Soft Power Actor* frame further reinforces this alignment with the literature. The explicit articulation of AFCON as a "tool of soft power" indicates a high level of discursive self-awareness, suggesting that the outlet is not merely reporting events but actively participating in the construction of a national narrative (Nye 107; Melissen 15). This supports findings that domestic media often function as extensions of state communication strategies in contexts of international image-building (Melissen 22).

The *Unfairly Criticized Host* frame, emphasizing resilience against unfair criticism, can be interpreted through the lens of defensive nationalism. Scholars have shown that positive national narratives are frequently accompanied by the delegitimization of external critique, particularly in postcolonial contexts (Anderson 141; Said 36). The reference to an "imperial gaze" reflects this dynamic, aligning with literature that critiques Western media biases while simultaneously reinforcing national cohesion (Said 59). However, this framing also raises questions about journalistic balance. The dismissal of criticism as "baseless" or conspiratorial suggests a limited engagement with alternative perspectives, which may reduce the analytical depth of the coverage (McChesney 73). As with *El Watan*, selective sourcing plays a key role, with institutional voices prioritized over dissenting ones (Herman and Chomsky 2).

When considered together, the findings illustrate a clear case of mirror framing, where two media systems construct opposing narratives using similar discursive strategies (Wolfsfeld 34). Both outlets rely on selective sourcing, evaluative language, and narrative coherence, but they invert the moral and political valence of the same events (Entman, "Framing" 24). Morocco is either a hegemonic manipulator (*El Watan*) or a legitimate leader (*Morocco World News*); AFCON is either a site of political interference or a showcase of excellence (Wolfsfeld 56).

Audience composition deserves consideration as an independent explanation. *Morocco World News*, dependent on international credibility, would likely frame Morocco positively regardless of rivalry, while *El Watan*'s adversarial framing may reflect domestic audience expectations as much as antagonism. Disentangling these fully is beyond this study's scope, but they remain analytically distinct: rivalry explains why Morocco is framed as it is; audience structure explains each outlet's default orientation. Both are necessary; neither is sufficient alone.

This polarization is consistent with research on media in contexts of geopolitical rivalry, where national media serve not only informational but also symbolic and ideological functions

(Voltmer 3; Price 45). The findings also resonate with Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, as both outlets contribute to the construction of national identity by defining the "self" in opposition to the "other" (Anderson 6).

At the same time, the comparison highlights important asymmetries. *El Watan*'s framing is primarily deconstructive, seeking to undermine Morocco's legitimacy, while *Morocco World News* adopts a constructive and promotional approach aimed at reinforcing national prestige (Schudson 89). This asymmetry is reinforced by the relative prevalence of frames within each outlet: *El Watan*'s dominant frame, Morocco's political grip, is primarily oppositional in character, whereas *Morocco World News*'s dominant frame, Africa's benchmark host, is primarily affirmative, meaning that the default register of each outlet's coverage, not merely its occasional commentary, is shaped by these opposing orientations. This difference reflects broader distinctions between critical and celebratory journalism, but it also suggests varying relationships between media and state narratives.

Crucially, neither outlet provides a fully balanced account of AFCON 2025. Instead, both selectively mobilize evidence to support pre-existing narratives, confirming Entman's argument that framing involves both inclusion and exclusion (Entman, Projections 54). This raises important questions about the role of media in shaping public understanding of international events, particularly in regions marked by political tension (Voltmer 187).

In sum, the results strongly align with existing literature on media framing, soft power, and geopolitical communication. Both Moroccan and Algerian media construct AFCON 2025 as more than a sporting event, embedding it within broader narratives of power, identity, and legitimacy. However, the stark contrast between the two outlets underscores the extent to which media representations are shaped by national context and political positioning, resulting in highly polarized and ideologically driven coverage.

## Limitations

Several scope conditions shape how these findings should be read. The 25-article corpus, drawn from one outlet per country, reflects the framing tendencies of *El Watan* and *Morocco World News* specifically rather than the broader Algerian and Moroccan media landscapes, and cannot fully isolate geopolitical rivalry from audience structure as competing explanations. The *El Watan* corpus also draws heavily on three contributors, so identified frames may partly reflect individual columnist voices. Finally, the analysis involved translation of French-language material and a two-month window centered on tournament coverage, both of which the author approached with sustained attention to interpretive precision and reflexivity given his Moroccan background. These considerations point toward productive directions for future research.

## Conclusion

*El Watan* and *Morocco World News* offer sharply contrasting portrayals of Morocco's hosting of AFCON 2025. *El Watan* frames the event critically, emphasizing political manipulation, social tension, and modernity as façade, while *Morocco World News* presents Morocco as a model host, highlighting organizational success and resilience against criticism. These opposing narrative priorities, one questioning Morocco's legitimacy, the other reinforcing it, align with existing literature showing that mega-event coverage reflects political context rather than neutral reporting. Both outlets rely on selective sourcing, evaluative language, and coherent narrative structures, with *El Watan*'s adversarial approach and *Morocco World News*'s promotional discourse together illustrating how sport becomes a vehicle for political messaging.

AFCON 2025 thus emerges as a site of competing narratives about power, identity, and legitimacy in the Maghreb, demonstrating how media framing can reinforce national perspectives and deepen regional divides. Future research could explore audience interpretation of these narratives or whether alternative media spaces challenge such polarized representations.

This study makes important contributions. First, it articulates a mirror framing dynamic: rather than simple counter-framing, the two outlets deploy identical discursive instruments (selective sourcing, moralizing language, external validation) to reach opposed conclusions about the same actors and events, suggesting framing under deep rivalry is structurally conditioned rather than a purely journalistic choice. Second, it extends soft power and nation branding frameworks beyond host-to-external-audience communication, showing this logic also operates inward, where a rival outlet's counter-framing mirrors and inverts the host's brand-building strategy.

## Works Cited


Abderrahmane, Abdelkader. "CAN-2025 Is Ironically a Golden Opportunity for Algerian Soft Power." *El Watan*, 25 January 2026, https://elwatan.dz/la-can-2025-est-ironiquement-une-opportunite-en-or-pour-le-soft-power-algerien/. Accessed 10 March 2026.

Alegi, Peter. *African Soccerscapes: How a Continent Changed the World's Game*. Ohio University Press, 2010.

Altheide, David. *Qualitative Media Analysis*. Sage Publications, 1996, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412985536.

Alhassan, Tarik. "Nation Branding in a Globalized Competitive World: How Can Countries Utilize Nation Brands to Foster Their Potential?" PhD thesis, 2024. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.22673.44648.

Alshikhy, Tariq, et al. "The Role and Impact of Sporting Mega-Events in the Context of Soft Power." *Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2025, pp. 1–22.

Amara, Mahfoud, and Youcef Bouandel. "Algeria and the FIFA World Cup: Between Political Legitimization and Regional Rivalry." *Soccer & Society*, vol. 23, no. 7, 2022, pp. 735–746, https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2022.2108241.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1983.

Anholt, Simon. *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Baida, Tachfine. "Moroccan Foreign Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa." *The Foundations of Moroccan Foreign Policy: An Anthology*, edited by Tachfine Baida, Sirius Productions, 2013, pp. 45–68.

Beissel, Alexander S., and Geoffery Z. Kohe. "United as One: The 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup Hosting Vision and the Symbolic Politics of Legacy." *Managing Sport and Leisure*, vol. 27, no. 6, 2022, pp. 593–613.

Ben Fatta, Mokhtar, et al. "The History of the Printed Press in Algeria: A Socio-Historical Reading." *Journal of Informatics Education and Research*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2026, pp. 1089–1093.

Ben Gamra, Farah. "How Morocco Is Turning AFCON 2025 into a Soft Power Engine." *Morocco World News*, 24 December 2025, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/12/272895/how-morocco-is-turning-afcon-2025-into-a-soft-power-engine/. Accessed 21 March 2026.

Benkhar, Bahia. "Morocco's AFCON 2025: A Masterclass in Hosting Marred by Final-Act Mayhem." *Morocco World News*, 22 January 2026, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2026/01/276094/moroccos-afcon-2025-a-masterclass-in-hosting-marred-by-final-act-mayhem/. Accessed 20 March 2026.

Berriah, Chahreddine. "After Morocco's Defeat in the AFCON Final: A Wave of Anti-Black Hate." *El Watan*, 24 January 2026, https://elwatan.dz/apres-la-defaite-du-maroc-en-finale-de-la-can-deferlement-de-haine-anti-noirs/. Accessed 9 March 2026.

---. "Moroccan Association for Human Rights: Denouncing Racism after the AFCON." *El Watan*, 31 January 2026, https://elwatan.dz/association-marocaine-des-droits-humains-denonciation-du-racisme-apres-la-can/. Accessed 10 March 2026.

Black, David. "The Symbolic Politics of Sport Mega-Events: 2010 in Comparative Perspective." *Politikon*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2007, pp. 261–276.

Boswell, Christina, et al. "The Role of Narratives in Migration Policy-Making: A Research Framework." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2010.00435.x.

Chafik, Ayoub, and Omar Iharchane. "Press Freedom in Morocco: A Changing Arena." *Brazilian Journalism Research*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2025, pp. 1–30. https://doi.org/10.25200/BJR.v21n1.2025.1665.

Chaib, Ahmed, and Christos Anagnostopoulos. "Game on: Exploring Qatar's Esports Development through the Lens of Vision 2030." *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 2025, pp. 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2025.2578259.

Cleland, Samuel Adjetey. *Sports as a Tool for Promoting Diplomacy: A Case Study of AFCON*. MA thesis, 2023.

Čizmić, Alex. "How Algeria and Morocco's Political Rivalry Spilled into Football." *The New Arab*, 3 April 2023, https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-football-fell-victim-algeria-and-moroccos-rivalry. Accessed 10 June 2026.

Cottle, Simon. *Mediatized Conflict: Developments in Media and Conflict Studies*. Open University Press, 2006.

Couldry, Nick, and Andreas Hepp. *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Polity Press, 2017.

Dayan, Daniel, and Elihu Katz. *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Harvard University Press, 1992.

Entman, Robert M. "Framing U.S. Coverage of International News: Contrasts in Narratives of the KAL and Iran Air Incidents." *Journal of Communication*, vol. 41, no. 4, 1991, pp. 6–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1991.tb02328.x.

---. *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press, 1995.

Fabiani, Riccardo. "Algeria and Morocco in Africa: Between Normal Competition and Diplomatic Escalation." *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2023*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2023, pp. 208–212. www.iemed.org/publication/algeria-and-morocco-in-africa-between-normal-competition-and-diplomatic-escalation/.

Faouzi, Adil. "AFCON 2025: Morocco Saw 190% Spike in Visitor Spending During Tournament." *Morocco World News*, 13 February 2026, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2026/02/278734/afcon-2025-morocco-saw-190 spike-in-visitor-spending-during-tournament/. Accessed 22 March 2026.

---. "AU Commission Acclaims Morocco's 'Exemplary' AFCON 2025 Organization." *Morocco World News*, 19 January 2026, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2026/01/275680/au-commission-acclaims-moroccos-exemplary-afcon-2025-organization/. Accessed 20 March 2026.

---. "Morocco's €1.5 Billion AFCON Revenue Covers 80% of 2030 World Cup Costs." *Morocco World News*, 27 January 2026, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2026/01/276524/moroccos-e1-5-billion-afcon-revenue-covers-80-of-2030-world-cup-costs/. Accessed 22 March 2026.

Fedele, Valentina. "Diasporas, Diasporic Football Clubs, and Their Connections to MENA: Reflections from Algerian-Linked Football Clubs in France." *Football, Identity and Politics in and from the MENA Region*, edited by Francesco Belcastro and Javier Bordón, SEPAD, 2024, pp. 9–17.

Gamson, William A. *Talking Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Grix, Jonathan, and Donna Lee. "Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction." *Global Society*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2013, pp. 521–536.

Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. SAGE Publications, 1997.

Hallin, Daniel C., and Paolo Mancini. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Pantheon Books, 1988.

Kabbour, Abderrahim. "How Morocco's Security System Prevented AFCON's Final From Turning Into Chaos." *Morocco World News*, 25 January 2026, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2026/01/276382/how-moroccos-security-system-prevented-afcons-final-from-turning-into-chaos/. Accessed 20 March 2026.

Kayssi, Issam, and Yasmine Zarhloule. "When Football Is More Than Football." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace – Diwan*, 26 February 2026, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2026/02/when-football-is-more-than-football. Accessed 28 February 2026.

Klein, Janina, and John Amis. "The Dynamics of Framing: Image, Emotion, and the European Migration Crisis." *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 64, no. 5, 2021, pp. 1324–1354, https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2017.0510.

Knott, Brendon, and Cem Tinaz. "The Legacy of Sport Events for Emerging Nations." *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, vol. 4, 2022, pp. 1–13.

Kouiyache, Omar, and Oussama Badad. "Shifting Currents: Hespress and El País Framing of Irregular Migration Before and After Spain's Recognition of the Moroccan Sahara." *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2025, pp. 91–108. https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol1iss1.5019.

Lamzouwaq, Saad Eddine. "What Lessons Can We Draw from AFCON 2025?" *Morocco World News*, 19 January 2026, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2026/01/275666/what-lessons-can-we-draw-from-afcon-2025/. Accessed 23 March 2026.

Mauro, Max. "Media Discourse, Sport and the Nation: Narratives and Counter-Narratives in the Digital Age." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 42, no. 6, 2020, pp. 932–951. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720902910.

McChesney, Robert W. *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-First Century*. Monthly Review Press, 2004.

Melissen, Jan, editor. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Mirzayeva, Nazrin. "The Role of Sports Diplomacy in Contemporary International Relations: A Case Study of the Olympic Games." *Scientific News of Sports Academy Sport Science Journal*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2024, pp. 116–121.

Næss, Hans Erik. "A Figurational Approach to Soft Power and Sport Events: The Case of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™." *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, vol. 5, 2023, article 1142878.

Nye, Joseph S., Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. PublicAffairs, 2004.

Ouahib, Yazid. "CAF: Why a Moroccan Referee for the Third-Place Match?" *El Watan*, 18 January 2026, https://elwatan.dz/caf-pourquoi-un-arbitre-marocain-pour-la-petite-finale/. Accessed 9 March 2026.

---. "Commentary / CAF: Morocco Suffers Another Setback." *El Watan*, 31 January 2026, https://elwatan.dz/commentaire-caf-le-maroc-essuie-un-autre-revers/. Accessed 10 March 2026.

---. "Morocco–Senegal Affair: The Honor of African Football at Stake." *El Watan*, 29 January 2026, https://elwatan.dz/affaire-maroc-senegal-lhonneur-du-football-africain-en-jeu/. Accessed 9 March 2026.

Price, Monroe E. *Media and Sovereignty: The Global Information Revolution and Its Challenge to State Power*. MIT Press, 2002.

Roudani, Cherkaoui. "Why Does the Algerian State Harbor Such Deep Hostility toward Morocco?" *Modern Diplomacy*, 20 July 2025, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/07/20/why-does-the-algerian-state-harbor-such-deep-hostility-toward-morocco/. Accessed 12 June 2026.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

Schudson, Michael. *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*. Polity Press, 2008.

Sour, Lotfi. "The Western Sahara Conflict in the Algerian Moroccan Relations: Understanding the Geopolitical Rivalry in the Struggle for Hegemony in the Maghreb Region." *UNISCI Journal*, no. 58, 2022, pp. 9–26.

Tchier, Ryma. "Football Cannot Put an End to Algeria and Morocco's Bitter Rivalry." *Al Jazeera*, 23 January 2023. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/23/football-cannot-put-an-end-to-algeria-and-moroccos-bitter-rivalry. Accessed 22 February 2026.

Tesch, Renata. *Qualitative Research: Analysis Types and Software*. Routledge, 1990.

van Dijk, Teun A. Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach. SAGE Publications, 1998.

Vincent, John, and Edward M. Kian. "Sport, New Media, and National Identity." *Routledge Handbook of Sport and New Media*, edited by Andrew C. Billings and Marie Hardin, Routledge, 2014.

Voltmer, Katrin. The Media in Transitional Democracies. Polity Press, 2013.

Walsh, Gianfranco, and Klaus-Peter Wiedmann. "Country Case Insight–Germany: Branding Germany–Managing Internal and External Country Reputation." *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*, by Keith Dinnie, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008.

Wolfsfeld, Gadi. Media and the Path to Peace. Cambridge University Press, 2004.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Competency Frameworks and MOOC Design: A Framework for Language Teacher Education

**Salma Driouach, Ahmed Ibrahimi, and Bouchra Chougrani**
École Normale Supérieure (ENS), Abdelmalek Essaâdi University
Humanities and Education Research Lab (HERL)

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.8451

**Salma Driouach** is a PhD researcher in Educational science. She holds an MA in Didactics of French as a Foreign Language from the École Normale Supérieure of Tetouan (Abdelmalek Essaadi University). Her doctoral thesis examines the role of professional competency frameworks in the design of digital training dispositifs, with particular attention to MOOCs for the training of language teacher educators.

Salma.driouach@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7790-6454

**Ahmed Ibrahimi** is a former *agrégé* in literature and currently serves as a lecturer and researcher at the École Normale Supérieure of Tetouan (Abdelmalek Essaadi University). His research interests include instructional design, digital education, and methodologies for teaching foreign languages. His academic profile combines practical teaching experience, research project management, educational supervision, and the production of specialized publications.

ahibrahimi@yahoo.fr https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8879-5561

**Bouchra Chougrani** is a habilitated associate professor at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Tetouan. Her publications focus on Francophone and beur literature, as well as on the relationships between literature and other art forms. Her current research interests include general and comparative literature, myth criticism, paraliterature, self-paced distance education, and the design of educational videos.

ahibrahimi@yahoo.fr https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8879-5561

# Competency Frameworks and MOOC Design: A Framework for Language Teacher Education

**Salma Driouach, Ahmed Ibrahimi, and Bouchra Chougrani**
École Normale Supérieure (ENS), Abdelmalek Essaâdi University
Humanities and Education Research Lab (HERL)

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the structural tension between professional competency frameworks and the pedagogical architecture of MOOCs in the specific context of language teacher education. Drawing on a comparative document analysis of major competency frameworks (CEFR Companion Volume, DigCompEdu, EAQUALS, and national FLE frameworks) and critical scholarship on MOOC design, the study employs a six-dimensional analytical grid to identify systematic points of convergence, tension, and structural incompatibility between the two corpora. The frameworks were selected on the basis of their institutional recognition, their relevance to language teacher education, and their broad uptake in the field; the MOOC literature was selected through a targeted review of empirical and conceptual studies addressing large-scale digital learning in professional and teacher education contexts. The analysis reveals that the complexity and situated nature of professional competencies in language teaching exceed what fully massive online environments can support in their standard configuration. The article proposes a theoretical and methodological contribution in the form of a four-step conceptual alignment mechanism that differentiates between competencies teachable at scale and those requiring situated practice, guided interaction, and authentic assessment. This mechanism, applied to the language teacher education context, articulates how existing principles of competency based education and instructional design can be systematically combined to determine the conditions under which MOOCs may contribute to competency development. The article argues that alignment is conditional and requires redesign, hybridization, and a competency-oriented logic that extends beyond the MOOC itself.

## KEYWORDS

**Competency Frameworks**

**MOOCs**

**Teachers Training**

**Competency-based Education**

**Instructional Design**

**Hybrid Learning**

## Introduction

Digital transformation has substantially reconfigured the professional expectations placed on teachers. In many educational systems, policy now requires not only that teachers develop digital skills, but that they actively integrate those skills into their pedagogical practice. Despite recognized expertise in technical, pedagogical, and content knowledge (TPACK), teachers frequently encounter institutional constraints, resource deficits, and an absence of sustained professional support (Wagner et al. 14). Frameworks for digital competence such as the UNESCO digital competence framework or DigCompEdu offer structured guidance for digital teaching and learning, but are never neutral documents: they simultaneously orient practice and

Contact ✉ salma.driouach@etu.uae.ac.ma
©2026

risk narrowing professional autonomy by implying that technology integration must conform to a predetermined trajectory (Mcgarr).

The development of digital competence among teacher educators is, however, deeply contingent on local conditions: cultural context, institutional leadership, and the availability of professional learning support all play a determining role (Carpenter). Research documents a recurrent deficit in many national systems insufficient institutional backing and the absence of conditions that would allow teachers to serve as digital mentors and role models for future educators (Lindfors et al. 6, 11, 13; Amhag et al. 2). These conditions bear directly on teachers' professional identity, as practitioners must navigate the tension between established practices and a rapidly evolving digital environment. That tension shapes not only how technical skills develop but also the higher-order, transformative dimensions of digital competence that remain undertheorized in much of the field (Nagel et al. 3). Sustained, systemic support for faculty development is accordingly a structural requirement for enabling teachers to teach, mentor, and conduct research in digital settings (Aithal and Aithal 40).

These tensions are not specific to the digital era. Questions of quality, scale, diversity, and professionalism constitute enduring debates in teacher education. The definition of the "good teacher" remains contested, with many researchers calling for evidence-informed approaches to professional development (Ingvarson and Rowe 13). In certain national contexts, widening access to teacher preparation has involved the recruitment of underqualified or contract staff, with documented negative consequences for educational equity and quality (Pandey 10). Student population diversity places increasing demands on pedagogical differentiation, while overly prescriptive professional norms risk constraining teacher agency rather than supporting it (Shaw 236). The rapid expansion of artificial intelligence further challenges inherited conceptions of professional standards and teacher identity (Rütti-Joy et al. 2), intensifying the longstanding tension between system-level imperatives and high-fidelity, context-sensitive teacher education (Abdallah and Abdallah 140). These structural tensions become particularly consequential when professional competency frameworks are mobilized within large-scale digital training environments such as MOOCs.

MOOCs have been of particular interest, notably given that they may comprise new forms of teacher learning. Several universities have used MOOCs as part of their teacher education programs for pre-service and in-service teachers. For example, MOOC implementations have reportedly had promising results in content knowledge acquisition and pedagogical and technological content knowledge development (Donitsa-Schmidt 8). They are popular among learners because they are often more available and flexible for people with busy working lives (Bettiol 2).

The complexity of this alignment problem intensifies when MOOCs are called upon to support competency-based language teacher education, a form of professional preparation that must be authentic, situated, and socially embedded, and that involves the integration of knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes grounded in practice (Mackay et al. 9). Research in professional education fields, including medical and engineering education, consistently identifies immersion, iterative feedback, and reflective adjustment as the central conditions for competence development (Matsas et al. 905). Moving from knowing to doing requires authentic, context-sensitive practice environments (Wong 2), and this shift implies pedagogical models oriented toward sustained feedback, critical reflection, and professional engagement rather than content delivery alone (Hatcher et al. 232). It is precisely this requirement that generates the central tension this article seeks to analyze. This article addresses three interrelated research questions: (1) What are the structural conditions that competency frameworks for language teacher education require of a learning environment? (2) In what ways does the standard MOOC

architecture respond to or fall short of these conditions? (3) Under what analytical conditions can partial, conditional alignment between competency frameworks and MOOCs be theorized? To address these questions, the article employs a comparative document analysis organized through a six-dimensional analytical grid, and proposes a four-step theoretical mechanism for alignment that is intended to guide instructional design decisions in hybrid teacher education settings.

## Methodology

The study employs a comparative document analysis based on two complementary corpora. The first corpus comprises publicly available professional competency frameworks for teachers and language educators, specifically: the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020), the DigCompEdu framework (Redecker, 2017), the EAQUALS Profiling Grid for Language Teachers (2013), and the French national framework for teacher professional competencies (Bulletin officiel, 2013). These frameworks were selected on three criteria: (a) their official or institutional status in teacher education; (b) their direct relevance to language teacher education, particularly in the FLE context; and (c) their broad uptake in research and policy on teacher competency. The second corpus consists of empirical and conceptual scholarship on MOOCs, selected from peer-reviewed literature addressing large-scale digital learning in professional education and language teacher training contexts, with preference given to studies examining pedagogical design, learner outcomes, assessment, and scalability constraints. To enable systematic comparison across the two corpora, a six-dimensional analytical grid was developed. The grid was constructed by identifying, across both corpora, the recurrent pedagogical and epistemic requirements articulated in competency frameworks and the recurrent structural features and constraints described in the MOOC literature. Points of convergence (dimensions where MOOC affordances align with framework requirements), tension (partial alignment, requiring design adaptation), and structural incompatibility (dimensions where the MOOC format is fundamentally ill-suited to framework expectations) were then mapped for each dimension. The grid is organized as follows:

- Epistemological orientations: This dimension examines whether frameworks favor transmissive pedagogy, activity-based learning, or socio-interactional learning, and whether they hold explicit or implicit views of knowledge.
- Pedagogical mechanisms: It contrasts the learning tasks and practices envisioned in teacher education with those in many MOOCs.
- Expected learning outcomes: This dimension explores the core skills, professional attitudes, and knowledge emphasized in teacher education models and their relationship to MOOCs.
- Forms of guidance and support: It assesses the roles of mentorship, feedback, modeling, scaffolding, and teaching presence, and the feasibility of scaling these supports in larger cohorts.
- Contextualization demands: This dimension highlights the importance of situated practice and responsiveness to learners, which massive environments often struggle to address.
- Assessment logics: It analyzes the types of assessment practices promoted in each corpus and the advantages and limitations of large-scale digital assessment delivery.

**Table 1**
Comparative Analytical Mapping of Competency Framework Requirements and MOOC Design Constraints in Language Teacher Education

| Analytical Dimension | Competency Frameworks (CEFR-CV, EAQUALS, National FLE) | MOOCs (FLE, TESOL, Applied Linguistics) | Notes / Constraints |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Linguistic Competence** | Core skill; underpins all teacher actions; focus on accurate language use and awareness of linguistic structures (Little 2020) | Easily taught at scale via video lectures, readings, quizzes | High scalability; low need for interactive adaptation |
| **Interactional Competence** | Emphasizes situated classroom interaction, turn-taking, adaptive discourse management (Ou and Gu 2021) | Difficult to teach at scale; limited synchronous practice | MOOCs rely on forums, peer interaction, or bot-assisted discussion; low authenticity |
| **Didactic Competence** | Lesson planning, scaffolding, corrective feedback; requires active teacher engagement (Kaendler et al. 2014) | Partial transmission via content delivery; some task facilitation possible | High-level pedagogical judgment constrained; automated quizzes cannot fully replicate real-time feedback |
| **Mediation Competence** | Managing cross-linguistic/cultural communication, explanatory feedback, task facilitation (Calvert and Sheen 2014) | Limited; peer-based or AI support provides partial scaffolding | Situated practice necessary; MOOCs struggle to simulate real intercultural interactions |
| **Intercultural Competence** | Understanding and responding to cultural differences; promoting plurilingual communication (Little 2020) | Partially addressed through discussion boards or scenarios | Heterogeneous learners; asynchronous interaction limits depth |
| **Reflective / Professional Judgment** | Reflection-in-action; moment-to-moment pedagogical decisions; assessment of own teaching practice (Donitsa-Schmidt and Topaz 2018) (Moorhouse et al. 2021) | Difficult; limited capacity for authentic reflection on real classroom events | MOOCs support reflection on hypothetical cases, but lack real-time situational context |

The application of the grid to both corpora allows us to analyze the gap between the rich professional expectations constructed in the teacher training sphere and the pedagogical limitations characterizing MOOCs. This analysis provides the empirical basis for locating the difficulties in achieving alignment and the theoretical model for reconciling the two ecosystems, as presented in the last section of this chapter. The analysis is theoretical and documentary in nature and does not involve empirical data collection.

## Findings

### Why Do Competency Frameworks Demand Rich and Multifaceted Learning?

Competency frameworks also require deep and rich learning, because they define professional competence as the complex composition of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and judgment, and of their application in authentic professional situations. Competency frameworks across domains reject the reduction of professional competence to declarative knowledge and see professional competence as socially-embedded, situated, and developmental. They define learning environments that must include practice, interaction, reflection, and professional identity formation.

First, the analyzed models define professional competence as an integrative, holistic construct involving cognitive, behavioral and affective aspects. Specifically, professional competence is conceptualized as the ability to mobilize knowledge, skills and dispositions in an integrated way in a given situation, and not as possession of knowledge elements. In computing fields, for example, some competency frameworks explicitly integrate disciplinary knowledge, practice, and professional attitude, because all three aspects are required together to prepare learners for the complexity of practice (Raj et al. 8).

Second, competence is not only about knowledge, it is practiced in context, through social interactions and reflection. Empirical studies show that professional knowledge is built and reformed in authentic complex contexts. Lave and Wenger's findings on social interaction in apprenticeship have been replicated in competency formation for novice pharmacists, where competence is performed during consultations, formed socially during practice and reflection, and is integrated through discussions of theory, self-reflection, and identity development in situated interactions (Whitaker and Reimer 3). This is also supported by findings regarding cultural competence, as professional competence is constructed through socially and contextually oriented practice, not as a set of decontextualized knowledge (Danso 11).

Theoretically and empirically, competence is also considered to be a process of cognitive and social aspects. Models describing communication competence include reflections and anticipation as well as sensitivity to contextual variables and show that competence is cognition in a social setting (Duran and Spitzberg 13). Expanding this further, experiential theories of learning in the social sciences also stress the interdependence of theory, practice and reflection in relational contexts, reinforcing the idea of competence developing through authentic and active participation in social practice (Dyke17). Taken together, these theories of learning help illuminate why competency frameworks require learning through practice and interaction rather than in isolation from them.

Third, competency frameworks explicitly or implicitly assume a set of professionalization processes that require rich learning conditions. Modeling gives learners the opportunity to observe expert practice, internalize professional standards and norms, and form a professional identity (Bélisle et al. 3). It has been stated that guided practice is an effective method of learning, because tasks with scaffolding and expert feedback allow learners to gradually increase their skills and grow in confidence (Frank et al. 3). The importance that feedback (i.e.

formative feedback) has for developing competence is often mentioned in relation to self-regulated learning as well as to evaluative judgement and professional development (Rung and George).

Collaboration, also an integral process, is a salient feature of competence development in team and interprofessional settings, hence frameworks focus on collaborative learning, dialogue, and shared responsibility as well as on the enabling and constraining influence of contextual and organizational factors (Goldman et al. 8) (Karimi and Farivarsadri 13). Reflexive judgement, involving a continuous interplay between experience, feedback and reflection, enables practitioners to navigate uncertain and unpredictable situations. Embedding reflexive judgement through reflection transforms experience experience into learning and develops identity and adaptive expertise (Bélisle et al. 6).

Technology and instructional design research show that activity- and process-oriented learning models provide better opportunities to adapt to the needs and context of learners. This is also supported by research on faculty development which stresses the role of reflective and transformational ways of learning for supporting personalized faculty development (Nair et al). Descriptions of personalized faculty development further illustrate the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all faculty development approaches for competency development. They help to explain why competency frameworks are predicated on a context of individualized support, feedback, and reflection.

## Why Do MOOCs Struggle to Address These Demands?

This means that MOOCs have often found it difficult to implement the requirements of such competency-based frameworks due to the institutional and technological rules and guidelines which structure MOOCs. Such frameworks often envision MOOCs as broadcast, video and text-based delivery systems where openness and accessibility dominate over individualization and personalization. The ever-expanding scope of MOOCs allows for the dissemination of wide-ranging knowledge but limits the support of frameworks that focus on complex, process-oriented learning outcomes (Ip et al. 3).

MOOC designs typically only allow for a few learning resources (short video lectures, quizzes and assessments) that could scale and are technically feasible, but that don't allow for the collaborative and authentic learning experiences considered pedagogically appropriate (Glance). In practice, most MOOCs are characterized by low social presence. With the majority of peer interactions being asynchronous in discussions that do not incorporate dialogic interaction and co-construction, the knowledge-building principles of modeling, guided practice, collaborative problem-solving, and contextual feedback (Poquet et al. 44) have not been fully implemented in learning environments.

The problem of assessment is particularly acute; competency frameworks often require active, trustworthy, context-sensitive assessment to achieve the goals of professional learning and judgement, while MOOCs tend to rely heavily on automated testing and peer assessment. One of the few practical forms of feedback in an extremely large environment, peer assessment has raised fundamental questions over its validity, reliability and formative effectiveness (Xiong and Suen 11). Automated assessment is also problematic: it enforces a narrowed focus, targeting knowledge that is easily measurable, rather than complex interactions and situated skills.

More broadly, recent analyses of digital learning ecosystems emphasize that large-scale personalization and automation, while offering new opportunities for access and engagement, tend to reconfigure pedagogical relations in ways that marginalize ethical mediation, professional judgement, and human guidance. In this perspective, the persistence of a human-centered role for educators is not a residual constraint but a structural requirement for sustaining meaningful learning and professional development in AI-augmented environment (Ben Khajjou et al 121).

To function at large scale, MOOCs are less likely to include more complex collaborative learning activities, and instead consist mostly of individual learning activities and forum interactions. The MOOC research in this area tended to avoid resource-intensive pedagogies, favoring transmissive pedagogies through which knowledge could be disseminated and coordinated globally (Zhan et al. 2287). Additionally, course durations may be shortened or course content compressed to maximize retention by students, limiting in-depth learning and mastery (Ferguson and Clow) (Donitsa-Schmidt and Topaz7).

Another important issue is the impact of dropout on aligning MOOCs with competency frameworks. Although predictive models and intervention approaches have been developed to address dropout, including learning analytics and neural networks (Qiu et al. 3), these approaches do not always consider the motivational and engagement-related issues associated with online courses at scale. MOOCs require high levels of learner self-regulation, with learner progress and persistence in courses in the hands of the learners. However, research shows that this assumption is not true of all learner types, with those who prefer structured support and pedagogical scaffolding being put at a disadvantage (Milligan and Littlejohn 1).

Together, this suggests that the pedagogical shortcuts needed to achieve scalability-standardization of content, automated assessment, decreased facilitation, learner autonomy and self-direction-are structurally ill-suited to the development and assessment of complex professional competencies. This structural tension also explains why MOOCs are effective for knowledge transfer, but misaligned with competency frameworks that require situated practice, prolonged engagement and reflexive judgement (Wulf et al. 2).

These limitations do not, however, exhaust the possibilities of the MOOC format when redesigned or embedded in broader pedagogical architectures. Several emerging developments merit consideration on their own terms. Adaptive learning systems that dynamically adjust content and support based on learner performance data move toward the personalization competency-based education requires. AI-supported mentoring environments now show capacity for generating individualized, criterion-referenced feedback at scale addressing one of the most persistent deficits of conventional MOOCs. Immersive simulation technologies offer partial proxies for the situated professional practice that competency frameworks demand, particularly for interactional competencies. Finally, small-group and hybrid MOOC variants that integrate synchronous peer interaction with large-scale content delivery suggest that the MOOC format is not fixed but configurable. These developments do not dissolve the structural tensions analyzed here, but they substantially reframe the question: the challenge is no longer whether MOOCs can support competency development in principle, but under which conditions and in combination with which complementary interventions this becomes achievable.

## Why is Alignment Theoretically Difficult?

The misalignment between competency frameworks and MOOCs cannot be framed as a problem of logistics or technical issues. Rather, it is the fundamentally different epistemological, pedagogical and assessment logic of these two educational models that make them seemingly irreconcilable.

These fundamental differences become particularly visible when examining the pedagogical conditions required for competence development which implies the internalization of mental models through modeling, guided practice, feedback and gradual taking over of responsibility. However, this requires a sustained pedagogy with carefully structured trajectory of learning outcomes, whereas the pedagogical models of MOOCs are typically based on learner autonomy, self-paced learning and minimum instructor presence. Empirical research suggests that learners within MOOCs are expected to undertake a high degree of self-regulation and receive limited pedagogical scaffolding, which impedes their learning of complex skills (Milligan and Littlejohn 118). Additionally, motivation and engagement studies report about the cognitive, emotional, and motivational barriers that many learners face in MOOCs (Terras and Ramsay 6).

Assessment is another area of disconnection. Competency-based education demands authentic, contextualized and often qualitative assessment of performance over time, informed by the judgment of experts, and supplemented by formative feedback. In contrast, it has been shown that MOOCs rely on summative assessment through automated quizzes, peer grading and standardized projects. Despite adaptations for large cohorts, these approaches are not designed to assess integrated professional competence and research on MOOC assessment indicates that validity and reliability, as well as assessing complex competencies requiring expert judgement, are key challenges. Systematic reviews also highlighted a stronger emphasis on cognitive and behavioral outcomes that can be easily standardized, over a focus on affective, reflective and practice-based outcomes that are prominent in competency frameworks (Xiong and Suen 12; Wei et al 8). While peer assessment may support engagement, the variability and lack of domain-specific expertise in peer feedback raises doubts as to the adequacy of peer assessment as an assessment method in competency-based learning (Staubitz et al 3). Implementing individualized assessment involving the use of competency profiles is challenging both from a technical and a pedagogical point of view (Paquette et al).

These epistemological, pedagogical, and assessment tensions point toward the misconceived view of alignment like a technical issue. MOOCs in a learning context are structurally designed for scalability, openness and learner self-direction, and their empirical design utilizes short instructional segments, automated feedback and limited tutor facilitation (Glance et al). Given these structural characteristics, forms of guided practice, contextualized feedback and authentic assessment remain the hallmark of competency-based systems, so someone cannot simply translate them online. If pedagogical approaches and institutional practices do not reconceptualize overall, technology cannot resolve assessment-related tensions (Xiong and Suen 124; Milligan and Littlejohn 8).

Not all professional competencies seem to be subject to these tensions to the same extent. In analyzing the compatibility of language-teacher competencies with massive online teaching using the ensemble of epistemological, pedagogical, and assessment constraints detailed above, we find that some competencies may have more or less compatibility with massive online teaching. Competencies describing declarative knowledge, conceptual knowledge, or awareness can be well-trained in large-scale MOOC designs, with the use of content delivery and automated learning activities. In contrast, those competencies describing situated social interaction, momentary pedagogical decisions, classroom management, or reflexive

professional judgement, which rely on continuing support, situated feedback, and authentic practice opportunities, are less suitable for MOOC designs. More generally, rather than blocking alignment entirely, misalignment likely affects the gradient of teachability at scale. The table below thus shows some of the skillsets that can be foundational in a language-based teaching and learning exercise, along with a simplified architecture of MOOCs.

**Table 2**

Scalability of Professional Teacher Competencies in MOOCs

| Competency | Teachable at Scale | Requires Situated Practice | Notes / References |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Linguistic knowledge / grammar** | | | (Jitpaisarnwattana et al. 7) ; (Donitsa-Schmidt & Topaz 10) ; (Julia et al. 3, 4) |
| **Didactic / theory** | | | (Hollebrands et al. 1, 9) ; (Gil-Jaurena and Domínguez 4, 17) |
| **Interactional management** | | | (Bozkurt et al); (Moorhouse et al 10) |
| **Pragmatics** | | | (Le) ; (Bozkurt et al. ) ; (Zhang et al. 2, 18) |
| **Mediation** | | | (Little 1, 2, 3) ; (Wei et al. 11, 12) |
| **Reflective linguistic judgment** | | | (Zhu and Bonk) ; (Elsayary 2) |
| **Oral interaction / spoken performance** | | | (Huang & Chen 5) ; (Van Der Zee et al.) |
| **Intercultural competence** | | | (Little 1, 3, 5); (Hollebrands and Lee 13) |

**Color key:**

Highly scalable  Partially scalable  Moderately non-scalable  Non-scalable

Not applicable

Seen this way, the difficulty of alignment does not emanate from shortcomings in design so much as the competing rationales that support two heritages of education, situated professional competence and the mass provision of knowledge.

## Contribution: A Theoretical Model for Alignment

Following the identification of structural misalignments between competency frameworks and MOOCs, this section proposes a theoretical and methodological model to clarify the conditions under which conceptual alignment may be envisaged. Rather than addressing technical optimization or platform-specific solutions, alignment is approached as a pedagogical and methodological issue. By articulating principles of competency-based education with

established models of digital learning design, the proposal examines how competencies may be addressed within, alongside, or beyond the MOOC format. The contribution is analytical and prescriptive, without empirical implementation.

## Competency-Based Education Principles as Design Constraints

Competency-based education presents significant challenges in digital environments, particularly in MOOCs. Competency frameworks conceptualize professional practice as an integrated and progressive construction of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and judgement in context. MOOCs, by contrast, are largely organized around standardization, automated assessment, mass delivery, and content transmission. This structural divergence places alignment at the center of debates on online teacher professionalization.

Alignment cannot be reduced to mapping competencies onto course objectives. It requires coherence between intended learning outcomes, pedagogical activities, and assessment modalities oriented toward professional performance. In MOOCs, learner heterogeneity combined with limited interaction and feedback further constrains the implementation of authentic and formative learning processes.

*Backward design* foregrounds expected professional action rather than content sequencing. Learning is planned by defining competencies to be demonstrated in authentic situations and then organizing learning experiences accordingly. Learning units function as means to professional judgement rather than as autonomous content blocks. This logic conflicts with the linear, content-driven organization of most MOOCs, where progression is structured around predefined thematic sequences.

*Authentic tasks* require learners to perform activities resembling real professional practice, mobilizing integrated knowledge, skills, and judgement. While central to competency development, such tasks are difficult to implement at scale. The massive and automated nature of MOOCs limits the design, monitoring, and feedback of context-sensitive activities, resulting in a necessarily selective and partial enactment of professional practice.

*Sequencing competencies* involves organizing learning so that professional capabilities develop progressively from simple to complex actions. This cumulative progression supports integrated competence. In MOOCs, however, content is typically organised thematically rather than hierarchically by competence, disrupting developmental continuity and fragmenting skill acquisition.

*Formative feedback* enables learners to refine professional performance through iterative guidance aligned with professional standards. In MOOCs, the scale of participation and reliance on automated or peer-based assessment significantly restrict the provision of timely, context-sensitive feedback. As a result, the systematic cultivation of complex competencies through formative processes remains limited, underscoring a fundamental tension between competency-based education and massive digital delivery.

**Table 3**

Alignment Matrix/Table Draft

| CompetencyPrinciple | Pedagogical Requirement | MOOC Constraint | Relevant Design Model |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Backward design** | Start from expected professional action | Linear, modular course structure | TPACK |
| **Authentic tasks** | Engage learners in real-world professional activities | Limited scalability and individualized guidance | CoI / Activity Theory |
| **Sequencing of competencies** | Progressively build integrated skills | Thematic module organization may disrupt developmental trajectory | DBR / TPACK |
| **Feedback and formative evaluation** | Provide timely, context-sensitive guidance | Automation and massiveness restrict personalized feedback | DigCompEdu / CoI |

Competency-based education's pedagogical requirements often clash with the structural constraints of MOOCs. Frameworks such as backward design, authenticity, sequencing, and formative evaluation reveal these tensions, showing how professional learning trajectories fragment in linear, content-driven courses. Authentic tasks expose the limits of scaling complex practices, sequencing highlights disrupted cumulative development, and feedback demonstrates the challenge of sustaining iterative, expert-guided growth.

These frameworks serve not only as design guides but as diagnostics of misalignment, clarifying where MOOCs can support knowledge and skill acquisition and where hybrid or complementary approaches are needed. This analysis underpins the alignment mechanism proposed in the following section, combining selective massive delivery, mentoring, authentic tasks, and iterative assessment to approximate competency-based outcomes.

## Instructional Design Frameworks for Thinking Alignment in Digital Contexts

Competency-based education's pedagogical requirements for professional development intersect with structural constraints of these large digital contexts. A set of design frameworks shows how to analyze and navigate structural constraints by shaping the ways that MOOCs can be used in support of learning within such constraints. While the models do not specify solutions, they illustrate the relationships among learning goals, learning activities, assessment, and technology in a digital learning environment.

Together, backward design, authenticity, sequencing, and formative evaluation expose the tension between the professional outcomes of our course design and the linear, content-driven, and teacher-centered management of the MOOC. We show how trajectories with a professional performance focus tend to be split thematically, even within a single articulation of the course. Authentic tasks alert us to the challenges of scaling complex, context-sensitive, professional practices and the shortcomings of off-the-shelf, modular, standardized automated course

products. Sequencing alerts us to the cumulative development of practice that is weakened by modular digital architectures. Finally, feedback and formative evaluation expose the limits of mass delivery, as iteration and expert judgement are critical components of professional growth and reflection.

More than just implementation models, these frameworks provide a diagnostic of structural misalignment between competency-based education and MOOCs, clarifying where MOOCs may be successfully applied for knowledge acquisition and skills practice, and where hybrid, selective or complementary course designs are necessary to align with the development of workplace-related continuous professional competence. This analysis serves as the basis for the alignment mechanism proposed in the next section, in which selective massive delivery, mentorship, authentic tasks, and multiple rounds of assessment are combined to approximate outcomes achieved through competency-based education.

## A Theoretical Mechanism for Alignment

Taking as a basis competency-based education and instructional design approaches, this section presents a theoretical conceptual model for mapping professional competency frameworks to MOOCs. While not intending this model to be read as a strict architecture, we hope to provide conceptually-based guidance on how we might structure the inevitably loose translation of messy, situated competencies to the constraints of massively delivered online instruction. This chain of decomposition, selective mapping, non-massive component integration, and competence-aligned assessment provides a model to describe orderly processes in which systematic alignment can be analyzed theoretically.

The first step deals with dividing a competence into its constituent parts. Pedagogically speaking, this means identifying those parts that can be learnt in a massified and heavily digitized environment, and those parts that require more individual or situationalised approaches. Decomposing competencies seeks to avoid reifying the MOOC as a learning platform for learning tasks outside its affordances, and to define what competencies can be learned in a massively distributed way. That is, the decomposition may support identifying which parts of the competency may be done massively distributed via the electronic platform and which may not, but need to be done differently.

The second step focuses on the mapping between the decomposed competencies and the MOOC's digital platform, and the learning functions it can support. From a pedagogical perspective, the challenge is to identify what tasks and activities can be efficiently delivered on a large scale and are compatible with the professional competencies to be developed. The grounding of the mapping is its intended use of the MOOC. This step solves the problem of scalability not by attempting to capture all components of competence within the black box of the MOOC, but rather by clarifying which dimensions of professionalization could be implemented on a large scale to be in line with the competency framework.

The third step highlights the limitations of addressing the full range of competence development within the MOOC format and the need for complementary learning interventions. From a pedagogical point of view, it stresses identifying those components of competence that need to be cultivated by personalized support, context-sensitive training, or eased interaction that cannot be easily digitalized. In order to overcome the limitations of MOOC designs, which may not fulfill the whole design, the combination of massive and non-massive design allows to embed MOOCs as tools into a hybrid MOOC. In this way, a mixed version of the hybrid MOOC is created which should cover the whole learning design, yet retaining the integrity of the competency framework.

A further step is to ensure that assessment techniques are congruent with the competencies expected. The issue is that learners need to learn suitably authentic, context-rich skills that validate performance in the workplace. Pedagogically, this entails devising assessment forms outside the platform, while competence-aligned assessment closes the loop of the learning process by putting the outcome of instruction to work in meaningful assessment. It helps overcome the limitations of automated and standardized assessment in MOOCs and addresses the key issue of how measurement and credibility can be given to the development of competence. This is only achieved through the use of assessing methods that pay justice to the complexity of professional practice.

What distinguishes this mechanism from existing frameworks such as backward design or the Community of Inquiry model is not the novelty of its principles but the specific operation it performs: the systematic decomposition of professional competencies by their scalability gradient, their conditional mapping onto MOOC affordances, and the explicit integration of non-massive components at points of structural incompatibility, a diagnostic and allocative procedure, not a generalized design philosophy. To illustrate, consider a MOOC for FLE teacher training addressing "didactic competence" the capacity to plan lessons, scaffold learner production, and deliver corrective feedback. Step one (decomposition) separates its declarative components (scaffolding principles, feedback typologies) from its performative ones (real-time classroom interaction). Step two (mapping) assigns the former to the MOOC via video instruction and automated knowledge checks. Step three (non-massive integration) designates the latter for a mentored micro-teaching practicum with peer group and expert feedback. Step four (competency-aligned assessment) replaces the automated quiz with a portfolio in which the trainee analyzes their recorded session against the framework's descriptors. This configuration retains the MOOC's scalability for knowledge acquisition while preserving the authenticity and reflexivity that competency development requires, an arrangement neither component could achieve independently.

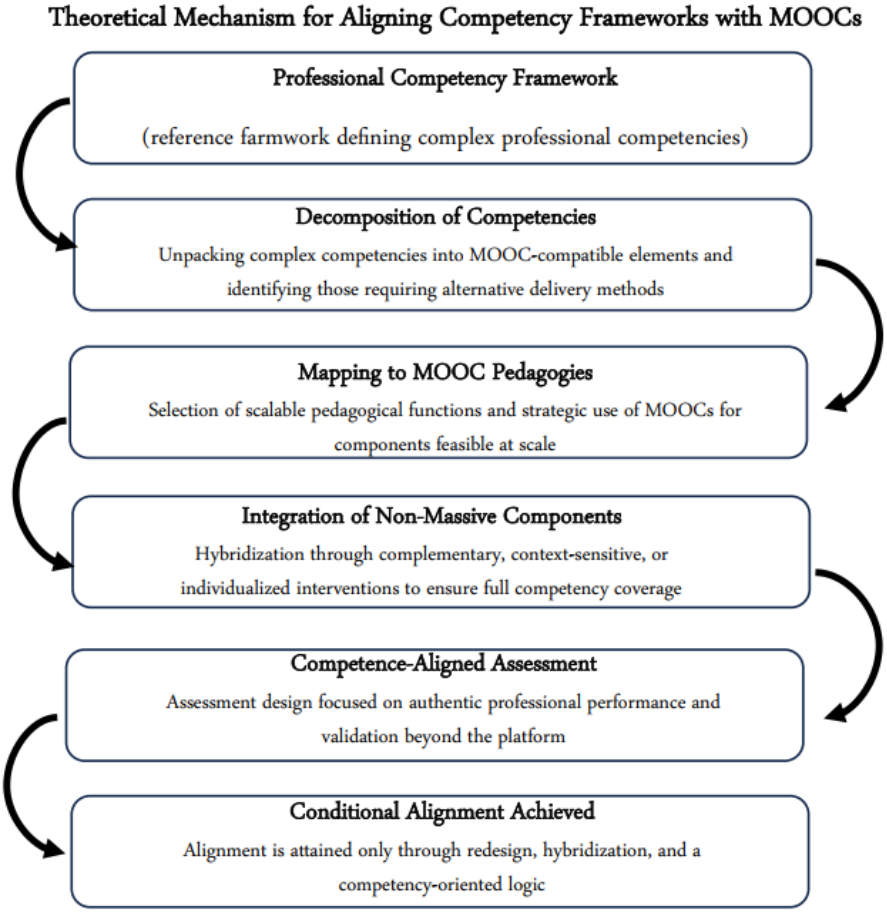



Fig 1. Theoretical mechanism for aligning professional competency frameworks with MOOCs

## Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that this tension is not contingent, nor reducible to questions of effectiveness of pedagogical design, or technological maturity. It is a tension between two contrasting rationales for education: that of situated construction and validation of professional competence, on the one hand, and that of large-scale access to codified knowledge and self-directed participation, on the other hand. From this viewpoint, the alignment problem needs to be understood as a theoretical, structural problem.

According to its epistemological assumptions, pedagogical architectures and assessment logics, this article shows that the formation of competence presupposes forms of mediation such as guided practice, contextual feedback and expert judgment that are only marginally compatible with the dominant MOOC model. The persistence of the tensions outlined in the literature, despite several surges in pedagogical and technological innovations, suggests that the solutions currently proposed are limited to the periphery of the problem rather than addressing it head-on. In this sense, any attempt to improve the design of MOOCs without questioning their basic principles only reinforces this false sense of alignment.

The theoretical model developed in this paper does not seek to resolve this incompatibility through technical optimization. It seeks to reframe the problem through a combination of competency-based education principles with established instructional design models for digital

learning to investigate the analytical conditions where partial and situated forms of alignment may be achieved. This has positioned MOOCs not as stand-alone instruments for developing professional competence but as (a series of) modules embedded in hybrid professional development ecosystems that maintain the principles of authenticity, progression, and assessment.

The present model does not claim empirical validation or offer transferable course designs. Its contribution is analytic: it delimits the conditions under which partial alignment between competency frameworks and MOOCs is theoretically defensible. For practitioners, four orientations follow. First, competency decomposition should be a mandatory preliminary stage, conducted jointly by subject-matter experts and instructional designers. Second, a hybrid component should be planned for every competency dimension requiring situated practice. Third, assessment instruments should be designed outside the platform, not constrained by automated grading tools. Fourth, MOOC platforms should be periodically audited against the competency frameworks they claim to address.

Emerging technologies as adaptive learning systems, AI-supported tutoring, and immersive simulation platforms are beginning to shift the boundary between what can be achieved at scale and what requires small-group conditions, altering the competency-scalability gradient on which the alignment problem rests. Future research should examine whether they enable forms of alignment the current MOOC architecture cannot support, since designing professional training for language teachers in digital environments is not a problem to be solved once, but an ongoing analytical and pedagogical practice.

## Works Cited

Abdallah, Asma Khaleel, and Rasha Khalil Abdallah. "Achieving Academic Excellence: The Intersection of Teacher Development, Quality Education, and Entrepreneurship." *Innovations in Teacher Development, Personalized Learning, and Upskilling the Workforce*, edited by Sriya Chakravarti, IGI Global, 2023, pp. 136-58. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-5518-0.ch007.

Aithal, P. S., and Shubhrajyotsna Aithal. "How to Empower Educators through Digital Pedagogies and Faculty Development Strategies." *International Journal of Applied Engineering and Management Letters*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2023, pp. 139-83. https://doi.org/10.47992/ijaeml.2581.7000.0198.

Amhag, Lisbeth, et al. "Teacher Educators' Use of Digital Tools and Needs for Digital Competence in Higher Education." *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2019, pp. 203-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/21532974.2019.1646169.

Bélisle, Marilou, et al. "A Conceptual Framework of Student Professionalization for Health Professional Education and Research." *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijnes-2020-0104.

Ben Khajjou, Ibrahim, et al. "Beyond Personalization: A Framework for Ethical, Equitable, and Human-Centered Digital Learning Ecosystems in the AI Era." *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2026, pp. 117-35. https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.6156.

Bettiol, Silvana, et al. "A Perspective of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Public Health." *Frontiers in Public Health*, vol. 10, 2022, article 1058383. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.1058383.

Bozkurt, Aras, et al. "Bot-Teachers in Hybrid Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): A Post-Humanist Experience." *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2018, pp. 39-59. https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.3273.

Calvert, Megan, and Younghee Sheen. "Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching: An Action-Research Study." *Language Teaching Research*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2014, pp. 226-44. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168814547037.

Carpenter, Jeffery P., et al. "The Importance of Context in Teacher Educators' Professional Digital Competence." *Teachers and Teaching*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2024, pp. 400-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2024.2320155.

Council of Europe. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, Companion Volume*. Council of Europe Publishing, 2020. https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages.

Danso, Ransford. "Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility: A Critical Reflection on Key Cultural Diversity Concepts." *Journal of Social Work*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2016, pp. 410-30. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017316654341.

Donitsa-Schmidt, Samadar, and Beverley Topaz. "Massive Open Online Courses as a Knowledge Base for Teachers." *Journal of Education for Teaching*, vol. 44, no. 5, 2018, pp. 608-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2018.1516350.

Du, Minghui, and Yiqun Qian. "Application of Massive Open Online Course to Grammar Teaching for English Majors Based on Deep Learning." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, 2022, article 755043. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.755043.

Duran, Robert L., and Brian H. Spitzberg. "Toward the Development and Validation of a Measure of Cognitive Communication Competence." *Communication Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 3, 1995, pp. 259-75. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463379509369976.

Dyke, Martin. "The Role of the 'Other' in Reflection, Knowledge Formation and Action in a Late Modernity." *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2006, pp. 105-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370500510728.

EAQUALS. *EAQUALS Profiling Grid for Language Teachers*. Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality in Language Services, 2013. https://www.eaquals.org/resources/profiling-grids/.

Elsayary, Areej. "Integrating Generative AI in Active Learning Environments: Enhancing Metacognition and Technological Skills." *Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2024, pp. 34-37. https://doi.org/10.54808/jsci.22.03.34.

Ferguson, Rebecca, and Doug Clow. "Consistent Commitment: Patterns of Engagement across Time in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)." *Journal of Learning Analytics*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2015, pp. 55-80. https://doi.org/10.18608/jla.2015.23.5.

Frank, Brian, et al. "Formative Feedback and Scaffolding for Developing Complex Problem Solving and Modelling Outcomes." *European Journal of Engineering Education*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2017, pp. 552-68. https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2017.1299692.

Gil-Jaurena, Inés, and Daniel Domínguez. "Teachers' Roles in Light of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): Evolution and Challenges in Higher Distance Education." *International Review of Education*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2018, pp. 197-219. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-018-9715-0.

Glance, David G., et al. "The Pedagogical Foundations of Massive Open Online Courses." *First Monday*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2013. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v18i5.4350.

Goldman, Joanne, et al. "Examining the Implementation of Collaborative Competencies in a Critical Care Setting: Key Challenges for Enacting Competency-Based Education." *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2017, pp. 407-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820.2017.1401987.

Hatcher, Robert L., et al. "Competency-Based Education for Professional Psychology: Moving from Concept to Practice." *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2013, pp. 225-34. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033765.

Hollebrands, Karen F., and Hollylynne S. Lee. "Effective Design of Massive Open Online Courses for Mathematics Teachers to Support Their Professional Learning." *ZDM*, vol. 52, no. 5, 2020, pp. 859-75. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11858-020-01142-0.

Huang, Qionghao, and Jili Chen. "Enhancing Academic Performance Prediction with Temporal Graph Networks for Massive Open Online Courses." *Journal of Big Data*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2024, article 52. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40537-024-00918-5.

Ingvarson, Lawrence, and Ken Rowe. "Conceptualising and Evaluating Teacher Quality: Substantive and Methodological Issues." *Australian Journal of Education*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2008, pp. 5-35. https://doi.org/10.1177/000494410805200102.

Ip, Horace H. S., et al. "Design and Evaluate Immersive Learning Experience for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)." *IEEE Transactions on Learning Technologies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2019, pp. 503-15. https://doi.org/10.1109/tlt.2018.2878700.

Jitpaisarnwattana, Napat, et al. "Language MOOCs: An Expanding Field." *Technology in Language Teaching & Learning*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2019, pp. 21-32. https://doi.org/10.29140/tltl.v1n1.142.

Kaendler, Celia, et al. "Teacher Competencies for the Implementation of Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Framework and Research Review." *Educational Psychology Review*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2014, pp. 505-36. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-014-9288-9.

Karimi, Hirou, and Guita Farivarsadri. "Exploring the Collaboration Skills among Architecture Students: A Quantitative Study in North Cyprus." *Buildings*, vol. 14, no. 7, 2024, article 1984. https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings14071984.

Kasch, Julia, et al. "Educational Scalability in MOOCs: Analysing Instructional Designs to Find Best Practices." *Computers & Education*, vol. 161, 2021, article 104054. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104054.

Le, Ha V. "Assessing Student Satisfaction with MOOCs: A Comprehensive Analysis of Coursera's Instructional Design and Learner Experience." *The International Journal of Information and Learning Technology*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2025, pp. 207-23. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijilt-07-2024-0159.

Lindfors, Maria, et al. "Conditions for Professional Digital Competence: The Teacher Educators' View." *Education Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2021, pp. 390-409. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2021.1890936.

Little, David. "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages." *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, edited by John I. Liontas et al., Wiley, 2020, pp. 1-7. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0114.pub2.

Mackay, Melissa, et al. "Developing Competencies in Public Health: A Scoping Review of the Literature on Developing Competency Frameworks and Student and Workforce Development." *Frontiers in Public Health*, vol. 12, 2024, article 1332412. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1332412.

Matsas, Bridget, et al. "Leadership Development in U.S. Undergraduate Medical Education: A Scoping Review of Curricular Content and Competency Frameworks." *Academic Medicine*, vol. 97, no. 6, 2022, pp. 899-908.

https://doi.org/10.1097/acm.0000000000004632.
McGarr, Olivier. "Exploring and Reflecting on the Influences That Shape Teacher Professional Digital Competence Frameworks." *Teachers and Teaching*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2024, pp. 509-25. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2024.2313641.
Milligan, Colin, and Allison Littlejohn. "How Health Professionals Regulate Their Learning in Massive Open Online Courses." *The Internet and Higher Education*, vol. 31, nos. 2-3, 2016, pp. 113-21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.07.005.
Moorhouse, Benjamin L., et al. "E-Classroom Interactional Competencies: Mediating and Assisting Language Learning during Synchronous Online Lessons." *RELC Journal*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2021, pp. 114-28. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688220985274.
Nagel, Ilka, et al. "Teacher Educators' Professional Agency in Facilitating Professional Digital Competence." *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 132, 2023, article 104238. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104238.
Nair, Balakrishnan (Kichu) R., et al. "Reimagining Faculty Development: A Paradigm Shift from Content to Transformative Learning Processes." *Medical Teacher*, vol. 47, no. 6, 2025, pp. 976-84. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2024.2390035.
Nguyen, Lan T., and Kulthida Tuamsuk. "Unveiling Scientific Integrity in Scholarly Publications: A Bibliometric Approach." *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-024-00164-5.
Ou, Wanyu A., and Michelle M. Gu. "Competence beyond Language: Translanguaging and Spatial Repertoire in Teacher-Student Interaction in a Music Classroom in an International Chinese University." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, vol. 25, no. 8, 2021, pp. 2741-58. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2021.1949261.
Pandey, Saroj. "Para-Teacher Scheme and Quality Education for All in India: Policy Perspectives and Challenges for School Effectiveness." *Journal of Education for Teaching*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2006, pp. 319-34. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607470600782468.
Paquette, Gilbert, et al. "Competency-Based Personalization for Massive Online Learning." *Smart Learning Environments*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015, article 4. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-015-0013-z.
Poquet, Oleksandra, et al. "Social Presence in Massive Open Online Courses." *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2018, pp. 43-68. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v19i3.3370.
Qiu, Lin, et al. "Student Dropout Prediction in Massive Open Online Courses by Convolutional Neural Networks." *Soft Computing*, vol. 23, no. 20, 2018, pp. 10287-301. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00500-018-3581-3.
Raj, Rajendra K., et al. "Professional Competencies in Computing Education: Pedagogies and Assessment." *Proceedings of the 2021 Working Group Reports on Innovation and Technology in Computer Science Education*, Association for Computing Machinery, 2021, pp. 133-61. https://doi.org/10.1145/3502870.3506570.
Redecker, Christine. *European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators: DigCompEdu*. Publications Office of the European Union, 2017. https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/digcompedu_en.
*Référentiel des compétences professionnelles des métiers du professorat et de l'éducation*. *Bulletin officiel de l'Éducation nationale*, no. 30, 25 July 2013. https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/13/Hebdo30/MENE1315928A.htm.

Rung, Andrea, and Roy George. "A Systematic Literature Review of Assessment Feedback in Preclinical Dental Education." *European Journal of Dental Education*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2020, pp. 135-50. https://doi.org/10.1111/eje.12584.

Rütti-Joy, Olivia, et al. "Teacher Educator Professionalism in the Age of AI: Navigating the New Landscape of Quality Education." *Artificial Intelligence and Education: Shaping the Future of Learning*, IntechOpen, 2024. https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1005030.

Schettino, Giovanni, et al. "Physicians' Adoption of Massive Open Online Courses Content in the Workplace: An Investigation on the Training Transfer Process through the Theory of Planned Behavior." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 154, 2024, article 108151. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2024.108151.

Shaw, Jenny. "The Diversity Paradox: Does Student Diversity Enhance or Challenge Excellence?" *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2009, pp. 321-31. https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770903266018.

Staubitz, Thomas, et al. "Improving the Peer Assessment Experience on MOOC Platforms." *Proceedings of the Third (2016) ACM Conference on Learning @ Scale*, Association for Computing Machinery, 2016, pp. 389-98. https://doi.org/10.1145/2876034.2876043.

Terras, Melody M., and Judith Ramsay. "Massive Open Online Courses: Insights and Challenges from a Psychological Perspective." *British Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2015, pp. 472-87. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12274.

Van Der Zee, Tim, et al. "Effects of Subtitles, Complexity, and Language Proficiency on Learning from Online Education Videos." *Journal of Media Psychology*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2017, pp. 18-30. https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000208.

Virani, Shreya, et al. "Adoption of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for Blended Learning: The Indian Educators' Perspective." *Interactive Learning Environments*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1060-76. https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1817760.

Wagner, Marlene, et al. "Exploring Teacher Educators' Challenges in the Context of Digital Transformation and Their Self-Reported TPACK: A Mixed Methods Study." *European Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2026, pp. 387-405. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2024.2340689.

Wei, Xiaomei, et al. "Assessment of Cognitive, Behavioral, and Affective Learning Outcomes in Massive Open Online Courses: A Systematic Literature Review." *Computers & Education*, vol. 163, 2020, article 104097. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104097.

---. "Do Learners Share the Same Perceived Learning Outcomes in MOOCs? Identifying the Role of Motivation, Perceived Learning Support, Learning Engagement, and Self-Regulated Learning Strategies." *The Internet and Higher Education*, vol. 56, 2022, article 100880. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2022.100880.

Whitaker, Louise, and Elisabeth Reimer. "Students' Conceptualisations of Critical Reflection." *Social Work Education*, vol. 36, no. 8, 2017, pp. 946-58. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1383377.

Wong, Brian M., and Eric S. Holmboe. "Transforming the Academic Faculty Perspective in Graduate Medical Education to Better Align Educational and Clinical Outcomes." *Academic Medicine*, vol. 91, no. 4, 2016, pp. 473-79. https://doi.org/10.1097/acm.0000000000001035.

Wulf, Jochen, et al. "Massive Open Online Courses." *Business & Information Systems Engineering*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2014, pp. 111-14. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12599-014-0313-9.

Xiong, Yao, and Hoi K. Suen. "Assessment Approaches in Massive Open Online Courses: Possibilities, Challenges and Future Directions." *International Review of Education*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2018, pp. 241-63. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-018-9710-5.

Zhan, Zehui, et al. "Sustainability Education in Massive Open Online Courses: A Content Analysis Approach." *Sustainability*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2015, pp. 2274-300. https://doi.org/10.3390/su7032274.

Zhang, Dennis J., et al. "Does Social Interaction Improve Learning Outcomes? Evidence from Field Experiments on Massive Open Online Courses." *Manufacturing & Service Operations Management*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2017, pp. 347-67. https://doi.org/10.1287/msom.2016.0615.

Zhu, Meina, and Curtis J. Bonk. "Designing MOOCs to Facilitate Participant Self-Monitoring for Self-Directed Learning." *Online Learning*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2019, pp. 106-34. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i4.2037.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Augmented Reality in English Language Teaching: Enhancing Engagement, Language Acquisition, and Cultural Awareness Among Moroccan Middle School Learners

**Mohamed Chahbi and Imane Bakkali**
Représentations, pratiques linguistiques, technologiques et sociales, ENS Tetouan
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.8337

**Mohamed Chahbi** is a Ph.D. student and English teacher in Morocco with over 20 years of teaching experience. He holds a Master's degree in Theatre and Performing Arts. His research focuses on the integration of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and emerging educational technologies to enhance teaching and learning, with particular emphasis on English language education and the Moroccan educational context. His academic interests include digital pedagogy, immersive learning environments, and innovative approaches to improving student engagement and learning outcomes.

mohamed.chahbi@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1244-6659

**Imane Bakkali** is a Professor of Educational Technologies at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) of Tétouan, Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Morocco, where she coordinates the ICT and Digital Skills modules. She holds a PhD in Educational Sciences and has over 28 years of experience in educational technology, digital transformation, and teacher education. Her research focuses on ICT, e-learning, artificial intelligence, augmented and virtual reality, and digital skills. She supervises doctoral research, has authored numerous scientific publications, and serves as a reviewer and scientific committee member for international journals and conferences. She is also an Erasmus Mundus Alumna.

i.bakkali@uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3864-4376

# Augmented Reality in English Language Teaching: Enhancing Engagement, Language Acquisition, and Cultural Awareness Among Moroccan Middle School Learners

**Mohamed Chahbi and Imane Bakkali**
Représentations, pratiques linguistiques, technologiques et sociales, ENS Tetouan
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the pedagogical potential of an Augmented Reality (AR)-enhanced instructional activity on learner engagement, English language performance, and cultural awareness among Moroccan middle school learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Adopting a mixed-methods research design, the study involved thirty third-year middle school students who participated in a culturally contextualized AR-based reading activity focusing on Jemaa El-Fnaa, a historically significant Moroccan heritage site. The instructional intervention integrated QR-code-based AR materials, including audiovisual narratives and contextual visual content, designed to supplement a conventional reading task. Quantitative data were collected using pre- and post-intervention performance tests assessing vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing, each scored on a 20-point scale, alongside a structured Likert-scale questionnaire measuring learner engagement, motivation, perceived learning effectiveness, and cultural awareness. Qualitative classroom observations and open-ended learner feedback were used to support data triangulation. Results indicated statistically significant improvements across the three assessed language domains following the intervention, alongside high levels of reported learner engagement and positive perceptions of the AR-supported activity. While the findings suggest that AR-based instruction can contribute to enhanced learner engagement and short-term language performance within a culturally familiar learning context, the results should be interpreted cautiously due to the limited duration of the intervention and the absence of a control group. The study contributes exploratory evidence to the growing body of research on AR in EFL education, particularly within underrepresented middle school contexts in Morocco, and highlights methodological and infrastructural considerations for future research.

## KEYWORDS

**Educational Technology**

**Augmented Reality**

**English as a Foreign Language**

**Moroccan Middle School Learners**

**Learner Engagement**

**Cultural Awareness**

## Introduction

The digitalization of education has accelerated over the last twenty years, transforming pedagogical practices across fields and educational levels and making it necessary to rethink how learning spaces can better facilitate learner engagement, interaction, and meaning-making. This change has been especially significant in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT),

Contact ✉ mohamed.chahbi@etu.uae.ac.ma ✉ i.bakkali@uae.ac.ma
©2026

where conventional textbook-oriented and form-based methods have long been criticized for inhibiting genuine communication, contextualized language learning, and meaningful cultural interaction. With the growing penetration of digital technologies into educational life, researchers and practitioners have turned to innovative tools that can enrich the language-learning experience and solve the most enduring pedagogical problems.

Augmented Reality (AR) is one of these new technologies that have received increasing attention among scholars, since it enables the superimposition of digital information comprising images, audio, video, and interactive content onto real-life settings in real time. In contrast to completely immersive virtual environments, AR does not sever learners' contact with their physical environment but instead adds a layer of contextualized digital information. Such an integrative feature facilitates the design of multisensory and interactive learning procedures coupled with situated learning that can be consistent with the learner-centered pedagogical approach and active learning (Al-Gindy et al. 171; AlGerafi et al.; Papanastasiou et al. 425). Empirical studies have associated the use of AR with a higher level of learner motivation, better attention, and deeper conceptual knowledge, especially in cases where the instructional design correlates closely with curricular goals (Sung and Huang 16).

In ELT, AR offers distinctive means of contextualizing linguistic input and encouraging meaningful understanding of language. AR can facilitate this by embedding vocabulary, texts, and communicative tasks in visually rich, culturally grounded environments, promoting comprehension, retention, and active engagement. Empirical research shows that AR-based activities can increase learners' willingness and motivation to complete instructional tasks, particularly in comparison with traditional text-based methods (Huang et al. 2; Parmaxi and Demetriou 861). Such results indicate that AR can be used to address current issues in ELT associated with learner disengagement and the perceived gap between classroom teaching and language application in the real world.

Theoretically, AR-based teaching fits well with constructivist and experiential theories of learning in that both view learning as an active, socially mediated process instead of the passive delivery of information. Constructivist frameworks focus on knowledge building through interaction with the content, peers, and the environment, whereas experiential learning focuses on the importance of concrete experience, reflection, and contextualized practice. These processes are supported by AR environments, where learners can interact with linguistic input through integrated visual, auditory, and textual representations (Lee and Park 936). The multimodal nature of this interaction supports deeper cognitive processing and reinforces the balance between language form, meaning, and context.

Empirical studies in ELT provide mounting evidence of positive relationships between AR integration and learner motivation, engagement, and perceived learning effectiveness (Marrahi-Gomez and Belda-Medina 2). Research in different learning settings suggests that AR-based tasks can improve learners' interest and sustained attention, especially in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension activities (Parmaxi and Demetriou 862; Solak and Cakir 67). Such results are usually attributed to the interactive and immersive nature of AR, which turns traditional learning practices into discovery-oriented ones. However, researchers warn that motivation benefits can be affected by novelty effects, particularly in short-term interventions; hence, caution is required in interpretation, along with transparency of methods.

Although there is a growing body of international research on the practice of AR in language learning, very little academic research has been conducted on the use of AR in North African settings, specifically in EFL classrooms in Moroccan middle schools. English is taught as a foreign language in Morocco, and learners' exposure to it is mostly restricted to classroom lessons. The possibilities of authentic communicative practice and use of language in a contextualized cultural setting are limited by the requirements of the curriculum, class sizes,

and the amount of instructional time available. Additionally, technology-based learning activities are applied unevenly in actual classrooms, particularly in public middle schools, where access to digital resources is not universal.

In this framework, AR is a potentially useful pedagogical resource to fill the gap between discursive teaching of language and meaningful sociocultural experience. By placing language learning in contexts that learners find familiar, AR can allow them to relate the linguistic input to their prior knowledge and experience, increasing its relevance and interest. Recent studies indicate that AR-supported activities can promote cultural awareness by allowing learners to approach culturally important places, practices, and stories in an immersive yet accessible manner (Cheng 1939; Hadjistassou and Louca 28; Liu et al. 1). Although the prevailing body of scholarship centers on target-language cultures, there is growing awareness of the pedagogical importance of incorporating learners' local cultural heritage into EFL teaching.

Cultural awareness is one of the core aspects of communicative competence, especially in foreign language contexts, where language use cannot be separated from sociocultural signification. The integration of local cultural content in ELT may help foster learners' identity and confidence, as well as offering significant contexts for language practice. AR offers such affordances by enabling virtual interaction with culturally relevant locations that would otherwise remain abstract in the classroom. AR-based activities can thus be used to address linguistic and cultural learning goals when they are pedagogically grounded.

The current research responds to these pedagogical and contextual issues by analyzing a culturally contextualized AR-based reading activity carried out in an EFL middle school classroom in Morocco. The intervention targeted Jemaa El-Fnaa, a historic and culturally important public space of deep significance to learners' cultural identity. The task involved printed reading resources and QR-based AR content with audiovisual stories and visual images aimed at complementing the reading text aligned with the objectives of *Focus: 3rd Year of Middle School Student's Book, Unit 14: Holidays and Travel*. These resources were designed to facilitate vocabulary building, reading comprehension, and writing while grounding language acquisition within a familiar cultural environment.

Instead of framing AR as a substitute for traditional instruction, the activity was developed as a pedagogical addition to the existing curricular practices. The intervention was aimed at supporting relationships between linguistic form, meaning, and sociocultural context by teaching English in a locally significant cultural context, in line with the demands of pedagogically founded applications of educational technology.

The current study is conducted in the framework of a mixed-method research design that explores the short-term outcomes of an AR-based activity on the engagement, language performance, namely vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, and cultural awareness of the learners. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-intervention assessments and structured questionnaires, and qualitative information was collected through classroom observations and learners' open-ended feedback. The results are discussed in light of the exploratory character of the research, with explicit consideration of methodological limitations such as the short duration of the intervention and the lack of a control group. Within these limits, the study adds context-specific evidence to research on AR-enhanced EFL instruction in Moroccan middle schools.

## Literature Review

Augmented Reality (AR) is a fairly recent educational technology that has gained growing academic interest in recent years due to its ability to improve learning in various fields and

levels of learning. AR has drawn particular interest in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, given its ability to superimpose digital data, including images, audio, video, and interactivity, on real-world settings in real time. This affordance lets learners interact with language input in a rich, engaging, and contextually situated way that is broadly believed to be instructionally effective in language education, where contextual and meaningful exposure is the primary component of language learning and memory. It is worth noting that AR allows immersive integration of technology at a low cost and does not require sophisticated equipment.

Theoretically, AR aligns closely with constructivist, connectivist, and experiential learning models, which define learning as an active process formed through interaction, contextualization, and experience rather than passive knowledge delivery. Constructivist theories underscore that learners construct knowledge by interacting with the material, other learners, and the surrounding environment, whereas experiential learning underscores the importance of tangible experiences and reflection in the learning process. These processes are facilitated by AR environments that embed linguistic input in meaningful contexts, combining visual, auditory, and textual input and enabling deeper information processing and firmer links among language form, meaning, and use (Lee and Park 937).

Empirical research on the application of AR in EFL classrooms provides substantial evidence that learner engagement and motivation are the main advantages of the practice. Empirical studies and systematic reviews consistently show that AR-oriented activities attract learners' attention and enhance their desire to engage in instructional activity compared with conventional text-based or teacher-centered strategies (Schorr et al. 13; Huang et al. 11). Curiosity, sustained attention, and exploratory learning have been shown to be aroused by the interactive and immersive quality of AR, which converts traditional classroom activities into more active engagement. Such affective results can be considered especially applicable to the EFL situation, where a learner might feel that language learning is monotonous or disconnected from the real world.

Meanwhile, researchers warn that novelty effects can inflate gains in engagement and motivation, particularly during short-term interventions. A number of researchers observe that learners' enthusiasm after first exposure to AR technology can decrease over time unless its instructional integration is pedagogically meaningful and sustained (Schorr et al. 12). This consideration highlights how critical it is to separate short-term affective effects from long-term instructional ones, especially in research without longitudinal designs or comparison groups.

In addition to affective variables, a growing literature has studied measurable language learning outcomes of AR in EFL situations. Research in secondary and tertiary educational environments indicates that AR-based teaching may enhance vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, and retention by contextualizing linguistic input through visual and tangible features (Bursali and Yilmaz 127; Ebadi and Ashrafabadi 9746). Quasi-experimental studies often report statistically significant differences between the AR-supported and traditional instruction groups, especially when the AR activities are clearly defined with regard to learning goals (Belda-Medina 7; Bamanger 37). AR can potentially support semantic processing and memory consolidation by placing new words and textual information within meaningful contexts.

Despite these encouraging results, consistent methodological weaknesses can be found in the literature. Numerous studies rest on short-term interventions, small samples, and non-randomized designs, which limit the generalizability of findings. Moreover, few studies report effect sizes or long-term retention, which restricts the ability to draw conclusions about lasting learning benefits. Such constraints point to the need for more experimental and longitudinal research designs that can isolate the instructional effects of AR and determine its long-term influence on language development.

Other conditions, such as teacher factors, are also critical to the successful implementation of AR in language education. Research on teacher attitudes and self-efficacy indicates that most teachers report favorable views of AR, yet classroom implementation requires sustained professional growth and pedagogical training (Okumus and Savas 16575). In the absence of proper preparation, AR may be implemented more as a technological novelty than as a teaching resource aligned with curricular goals. The pedagogical success of AR thus lies in teachers' capability to create meaningful AR-related assignments and manage classroom dynamics.

Under-resourced schools and institutions, where access to technology, technical assistance, and professional development opportunities may be low, face these difficulties especially acutely. Research in resource-constrained or developing environments has identified obstacles including poor internet connectivity, limited access to AR-capable devices, and a lack of institutional support (Wu et al. 42). Consequently, the usefulness and scalability of AR-based teaching differ significantly across settings, and claims about the method's applicability should be kept in perspective.

A current trend in the AR field in EFL has been the emphasis on cultural awareness and intercultural competence. Researchers increasingly stress that language learning cannot be separated from cultural comprehension and that successful EFL teaching should incorporate both the linguistic and cultural aspects of communication (Hicham et al. 2). AR provides unique possibilities for introducing cultural texts into immersive learning experiences in which learners can encounter cultural lifestyles, destinations, and stories beyond lifeless textbook accounts (Di Fuccio et al. 21). Empirical evidence indicates that activities based on AR can improve cultural knowledge and strengthen the links between linguistic expressions and sociocultural interpretation.

Notably, much existing research has emphasized exposure to target-language or foreign cultures, while comparatively fewer studies have examined the pedagogical value of integrating learners' local or national cultural heritage into AR-supported EFL instruction. Recent scholarship suggests that grounding language learning in learners' own cultural contexts can enhance relevance, learner identity, and confidence, particularly in foreign language settings where learners may feel detached from the target language community (Hadjistassou and Louca 27; Liu et al. 2). This gap highlights the need for context-sensitive research exploring how AR can be used to value local culture while supporting language development.

Overall, the literature suggests that AR holds considerable promise for enhancing learner engagement, motivation, language achievement, and cultural awareness in EFL education when pedagogically grounded and contextually appropriate. At the same time, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding middle school EFL settings in developing countries, short-term versus sustained instructional effects, and the integration of local cultural content. The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining a culturally contextualized AR-based reading activity in a Moroccan middle school EFL context, while explicitly acknowledging the methodological constraints associated with exploratory, short-duration interventions.

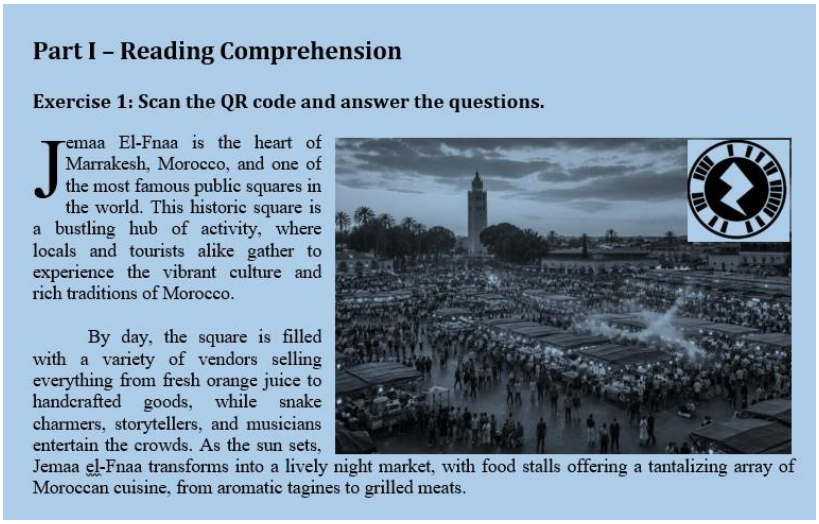
## Methodology

The current study used a mixed-methods research design to examine the immediate pedagogic impact of an Augmented Reality (AR)-based instructional exercise on English language acquisition in a Moroccan middle-school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The combination of quantitative methods, using learner questionnaires and pre- and post-tests, and qualitative procedures, based on classroom observations, was intended to capture objective changes in learners' language performance as well as their subjective evaluations of

engagement, motivation, and cultural awareness prompted by the instructional intervention. The triangulation of the methodology was achieved through a combination of performance-based measurement, questionnaires completed by the learners, and classroom observations.

The empirical research was conducted in one of the public secondary institutions in the northern part of Morocco. Thirty-three third-year students (aged 14–15) volunteered to be part of the convenience sample. The respondents all attended the same English course and were assessed by their instructor as having pre-intermediate to intermediate levels of proficiency. Before the intervention, the participants had limited exposure to technologically mediated instruction and no prior experience with AR-based learning activities. The small sample was therefore appropriate for an exploratory within-group study of short-term instructional outcomes, but not for generalization.

The teaching treatment consisted of a culturally specific AR-enhanced reading activity about Jemaa El-Fnaa, a historic and culturally important public place in Morocco. Instructional materials included a printed English reading book, namely *Focus: 3rd Year of Middle School Student's Book*, along with vocabulary support materials and comprehension tasks aligned with the middle school curriculum. QR codes embedded in the print materials allowed learners to access AR-enhanced content on school-provided tablets. The AR package included brief audiovisual stories, visual images, and background cultural information intended to supplement the text and aid comprehension, lexical learning, and literacy.



**Part I – Reading Comprehension**

**Exercise 1: Scan the QR code and answer the questions.**

Jemaa El-Fnaa is the heart of Marrakesh, Morocco, and one of the most famous public squares in the world. This historic square is a bustling hub of activity, where locals and tourists alike gather to experience the vibrant culture and rich traditions of Morocco.

By day, the square is filled with a variety of vendors selling everything from fresh orange juice to handcrafted goods, while snake charmers, storytellers, and musicians entertain the crowds. As the sun sets, Jemaa el-Fnaa transforms into a lively night market, with food stalls offering a tantalizing array of Moroccan cuisine, from aromatic tagines to grilled meats.

Fig. 1. AR-Enhanced Reading Activity for Jemaa El-Fnaa with QR Code Developed by Zappar

The intervention took place within a sixty-minute English lesson. Following a brief introduction to the topic and a briefing about accessing and moving around the AR materials, learners worked with the reading text and the AR content independently and in small groups, scanning the QR codes, viewing the multimedia, and completing the comprehension and vocabulary exercises. The instructor took on the role of facilitator, providing technical support where necessary and monitoring learner participation and task completion without direct instructional interference.

Quantitative data were collected through a performance-based language test and a structured learner questionnaire. The test assessed vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and writing ability, each scored out of 20, for an overall maximum of 60. A single scoring rubric was used consistently in both the pre- and post-tests. The pre-test was administered seven days before the intervention, and the post-test immediately after the AR-mediated lesson. The instruments were not identical but were matched in difficulty and task type to achieve equivalence.

The learner questionnaire was given immediately after the intervention and included mostly Likert-scale questions (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) that assessed engagement, motivation, perceived learning effectiveness, AR material usability, cultural awareness, and overall satisfaction. A limited number of open-ended items elicited qualitative feedback on what the participants learned, what benefits they gained, and what challenges they faced.

Classroom observations conducted by the teacher supplemented the qualitative data during the intervention. The observational notes centered on indicators including time on task, learner participation, peer interaction, and the usability of the AR materials. These observations served to contextualize and triangulate the quantitative results but were not independent measures.

Quantitative data analysis started with descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) to summarize the pre- and post-test performance in terms of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing. Paired-samples t-tests were used to determine the statistical significance of the observed changes in each language skill. Such an analytic plan was consistent with the within-group design and the matched pre- and post-intervention data. The traditional alpha level ($p < .05$) was used to determine statistical significance.

Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data drawn from open-ended questionnaire responses and classroom observation notes. Learners' answers were coded inductively to identify recurrent patterns concerning engagement, comprehension, cultural awareness, and attitudes toward AR-supported learning. Self-reported perceptions were supported by observation notes, which provided background on classroom activity during the intervention.

Ethical procedures were followed strictly throughout the project. Participation was entirely voluntary, and learners received clear, age-appropriate information about the purpose and methods of the study. All data were collected with the consent of the school administration. All learner records were anonymized, and confidentiality was maintained in the analysis and dissemination. The AR material underwent a preliminary check to ascertain its suitability in terms of age, culture, and curricular objectives.

Since the study is exploratory, a number of methodological limitations should be noted. The intervention involved one sixty-minute session, and no control or comparison group was included, which restricted the ability to establish a cause-and-effect relationship. The sample size is also relatively small, which limits the generalizability of the results. The interpretation of the results took these constraints into account, positioning the study as a preliminary one aimed at informing more rigorous future research designs.

## Results

Quantitative results are reported with descriptive and inferential statistics, whereas qualitative results draw on classroom observations and learners' open-ended feedback to contextualize the observed patterns without going beyond descriptive reporting.

The post-intervention questionnaire, complemented by classroom observations, was used to analyze learner engagement during the AR-supported reading activity. On the whole, learners reported high interest, motivation, and sustained attention during the activity, and the observational data supported this by showing extended time on task, active communication with peers, and consistent engagement with the AR materials throughout the lesson. As Table 1 shows, the majority of responses fell in the agree and strongly agree categories for all engagement items, though the presence of neutral and lower ratings reflects some variability in individual learner experiences rather than uniformly high engagement.

**Table 1**
Learner Engagement During the AR-Based Reading Activity ($N = 30$)

| Item | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **The AR activity made the reading passage more interesting** | 65% | 25% | 7% | 3% | 0% |
| **I felt more motivated to participate in the AR activity** | 60% | 30% | 5% | 5% | 0% |
| **The AR content helped me stay focused during the activity** | 55% | 35% | 7% | 3% | 0% |

Learners' language performance was evaluated using the pre-test and post-test results in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing, each on a 20-point scale. Descriptive analysis showed improvements in the means of all three language domains after the AR-based intervention. As Table 2 illustrates, improvement was seen at the group level, whereas variation in individual gains reflects differences in initial proficiency as well as in interaction with the instructional resources.

**Table 2**
Descriptive Statistics for Pre- and Post-Test Scores (20-Point Scale, $N = 30$)

| Measure | Pre-Test Mean | Post-Test Mean | Mean Gain | *SD* (Gain) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Vocabulary** | 13.23 | 15.80 | 2.57 | 1.43 |
| **Reading Comprehension** | 14.27 | 15.88 | 1.61 | 0.89 |
| **Writing** | 12.98 | 14.55 | 1.58 | 1.09 |

Paired-samples *t*-tests were used to establish the statistical significance of the increases in observed scores on each language skill. The results show statistically significant differences between pre-test and post-test scores across all three domains at the $p < .05$ level. These inferential statistics are summarized in Table 3 and are reported as a within-group comparison, without causal attribution beyond what the study design allows.

**Table 3**
Paired-Samples *t*-Test Results for Language Learning Outcomes ($N = 30$)

| Measure | *t*(29) | *p* |
|---|---|---|
| **Vocabulary** | 9.83 | < .001 |
| **Reading Comprehension** | 9.87 | < .001 |
| **Writing** | 7.91 | < .001 |

Learners' perceptions of cultural awareness development were investigated through a questionnaire covering knowledge of Moroccan culture, association of the reading text with real-life situations, and confidence in discussing cultural issues in English. The feedback shows positive perceptions of cultural learning outcomes related to the AR-based activity. As Table 4

shows, the majority of learners agreed or strongly agreed that the activity helped them understand and contextualize the culture.

**Table 4**
Learner Perceptions of Cultural Awareness Development ($N = 30$)

| Item | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **The AR activity enhanced my understanding of Moroccan culture** | 70% | 25% | 5% | 0% | 0% |
| **The AR content helped me connect the text to real-world scenarios** | 65% | 30% | 5% | 0% | 0% |
| **I feel more confident discussing Moroccan culture in English** | 60% | 35% | 5% | 0% | 0% |

Items on the post-intervention questionnaire were also used to obtain learners' evaluations of usability and technical performance. Most participants said that the AR application was simple and worked well throughout the lesson, allowing them to concentrate on instructional activities. Table 5 summarizes these responses concerning usability and technical quality.

**Table 5**
Learner Evaluation of AR Usability and Technical Performance ($N = 30$)

| Item | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **The AR application was easy to use** | 70% | 25% | 5% | 0% | 0% |
| **I encountered no technical difficulties during the activity** | 65% | 30% | 5% | 0% | 0% |
| **The quality of the AR content was high** | 75% | 20% | 5% | 0% | 0% |

General satisfaction with the AR-supported learning experience was high, and the majority of learners made positive remarks about the activity and expressed a desire to participate in similar technology-based classes in the future. Table 6 indicates that most participants were satisfied with the AR-based reading experience, viewed it as a valuable learning experience, and would recommend using AR in future lessons, although slight differences across items may reflect variation in individual learners' preferences.

**Table 6**
Learner Satisfaction with the AR-Based Activity ($N = 30$)

| Item | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I am satisfied with the AR-based reading activity** | 75% | 20% | 5% | 0% | 0% |
| **I would recommend using AR in future classes** | 80% | 15% | 5% | 0% | 0% |
| **The AR activity was a valuable learning experience** | 70% | 25% | 5% | 0% | 0% |

These quantitative results were further framed by qualitative feedback in the form of open-ended questionnaire answers and observational data in the classroom. Students often reported that the AR activity was interesting and helped them learn vocabulary and cultural information. The observations in the classroom showed more interaction between peers, active participation, and engagement during the lesson.

These impressions were supported by observation in the classroom, which found increased interaction between peers, active participation, and sustained attention throughout the session. Students worked in small groups when exploring the AR material, discussing cultural facts, asking questions, and helping each other to navigate the multimedia material. The AR activity provoked curiosity and exploratory behavior, as students accessed videos and images multiple times to support their interpretation or obtain additional information about Moroccan traditions and the historical importance of the square.

Moreover, the qualitative data revealed that the AR materials supported the contextualized learning in such a way that the students could connect the linguistic input with culturally relevant experiences. Several learners stated that they gained confidence in speaking about Moroccan culture in English, which demonstrates that the exercise strengthened not only their understanding of Moroccan culture but also their opportunities for meaningful communication. Attention and concentration were observed to increase, and distracted behaviors were fewer than during traditional text-only reading tasks, suggesting that the multimodal elements of AR served as scaffolds for both language and cultural learning.

Taken together, the qualitative feedback indicates that the students reacted positively to the AR-enhanced reading activity, showing greater engagement, collaborative learning, and better understanding of cultural material. These findings complement the quantitative results and suggest that culturally contextualized AR interventions can support both linguistic and cultural learning outcomes in middle school EFL settings.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The current research investigated the short-term impacts of a culturally contextualized Augmented Reality (AR)-enhanced reading task on the engagement of learners, language performance, and cultural awareness in an EFL learning environment at a middle school in Morocco. By incorporating AR technology into a traditional reading task, the study identified the possibility of using immersive, multimodal, and culturally recognizable materials to improve learner engagement and language-related outcomes within a short period of instruction. Its results provide exploratory evidence of the pedagogical possibilities of AR in underrepresented EFL settings and highlight critical methodological and contextual concerns.

With regard to learner engagement and motivation, the results show that learners reacted positively to the AR-aided activity. Questionnaire responses and classroom observations indicate that the multimedia elements and interactivity sustained attention, participation, and interest during the lesson. These findings align with previous studies indicating that AR can increase engagement by converting text-based activities into interactive learning (Parmaxi and Demetriou 862; Schorr et al. 8). The visual and exploratory quality of AR seems to have aided learners' concentration and their inclination toward the reading activity, especially in EFL classrooms where engagement is generally difficult to sustain.

Nonetheless, these engagement outcomes should be interpreted with care. The intervention was a single one-hour session and learners' first experience with AR-based instruction. As earlier studies have noted, increased activity in such situations can partly be explained by novelty effects rather than long-term pedagogical influence (Schorr et al. 9). Along these lines, the engagement observed in this study must be interpreted as a short-term affective response. This explanation concurs with calls for longitudinal studies capable of differentiating between excitement induced by initial exposure and long-term motivational gains.

Concerning language performance, the learners showed statistically significant improvement in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing after the AR-based intervention. These gains indicate that embedding linguistic input in multimodal and contextualized materials can facilitate short-term learning by enhancing the links among language form, meaning, and context. AR-based visuals and interactive features may have served as scaffolding tools that helped learners understand and retain lexical information, which in turn supported better processing of the textual input. This finding is in line with previous research that has found positive effects of AR on vocabulary and reading comprehension in EFL settings (Bursali and Yilmaz 127; Ebadi and Ashrafabadi 9746).

However, the lack of a control or comparison group restricts causal inference. The observed performance gains cannot be attributed solely to the use of AR, because other factors might also have played a role, including focused instructional time, familiarity with the tasks, and learners' attention. Consequently, the results can be considered an indication of AR's possible efficacy when meaningfully incorporated into reading instruction, rather than definitive evidence of it. Such a conservative approach reflects broader methodological constraints found in the AR literature, in which small samples and short-term interventions are still prevalent (Belda-Medina 7; Bamanger 31).

The results concerning cultural awareness also indicate that culturally oriented learning can be supported through AR-based instruction when language learning is situated within familiar sociocultural parameters. Students reported feeling more confident talking about Moroccan cultural issues in English and better able to relate textual materials to the real world. These effects are congruent with past studies emphasizing AR's ability to mediate language acquisition and cultural cognition by placing linguistic stimuli in meaningful conditions (Di Fuccio et al. 2). The virtual interaction with Jemaa El-Fnaa also seems to have allowed learners to draw on prior cultural knowledge and express themselves in English.

Notably, this work contributes to the literature by demonstrating the educational usefulness of integrating learners' local cultural heritage into AR-based EFL teaching. Although much previous research focuses on exposure to target-language or foreign cultures, few studies examine how AR can be applied to valorize learners' own cultural contexts. Instruction based on locally significant material can improve relevance, learner identity, and confidence, especially in second language contexts where students might feel that English is unrelated to their experiences.

Learners' perceptions of usability and satisfaction suggest that AR-supported instruction can be adopted in the classroom within the technical and cognitive capacities of middle school learners, at least under controlled classroom conditions. The majority of respondents stated that the AR materials were convenient and highly reliable, which enabled them to spend more time on instructional tasks rather than technical issues. This evidence indicates that properly organized AR activities can be accessible even to learners with minimal or no previous experience of educational technologies. These perceptions should be understood, however, in the context of implementation circumstances.

The success of the AR activity depended on the availability of school-provided devices, reliable infrastructure, and teacher facilitation. These conditions are not always consistent in rural Moroccan public schools, especially those with limited resources. Thus, claims about the scalability and sustainability of AR-based instruction should be made with discretion. Wider adoption would require institutional investment, teacher training, and infrastructure development, echoing prior studies that highlight the significance of contextual and institutional variables in educational technology adoption (Wu et al. 42).

A number of constraints must be recognized. The brevity of the intervention precludes conclusions about long-term learning impacts, and the sample is small and restricted to a single classroom, which limits generalizability. The absence of a comparison group precludes causal inference, and the strongly positive perceptions may have been amplified by the immediacy of post-intervention data collection. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and experimental or quasi-experimental approaches to offer more robust evidence. More research on productive language skills and teachers' perspectives would also enrich knowledge of AR's pedagogical potential.

In conclusion, this paper offers exploratory evidence that culturally contextualized AR-based reading activities can facilitate learner engagement, short-term language performance, and cultural awareness in Moroccan middle school EFL classes. Although AR cannot be regarded as a solution in its own right, its considered and contextually sensitive application can support language learning experiences, provided that it is adjusted to curricular objectives and infrastructural realities. By placing language learning within learners' immediate cultural surroundings, AR offers a significant prospect of relating linguistic development to lived experience, while underscoring that future studies should be approached with methodological rigor and contextual awareness.

## Works Cited

AlGerafi, Mohammed A. M., et al. "Unlocking the Potential: A Comprehensive Evaluation of Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality in Education." *Electronics*, vol. 12, no. 18, 2023, article 3953. https://doi.org/10.3390/electronics12183953.

Al-Gindy, Ahmed, et al. "Virtual Reality: Development of an Integrated Learning Environment for Education." *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2020, pp. 171–175. https://doi.org/10.18178/ijiet.2020.10.3.1358.

Annamalai, Nagaletchimee, et al. "High School Teachers' Perception of AR and VR in English Language Teaching and Learning Activities: A Developing Country Perspective." *Education and Information Technologies*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2023, pp. 3117–3143. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-11275-2.

Bamanger, Ebrahim. "Augmented Reality in EFL Education." *The Journal of Technology Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2025, pp. 30–41. https://doi.org/10.21061/jts.439.

Belda-Medina, José. "Augmented Reality in CLIL Settings: Enhancing Language and Content Integration." *Contemporary Educational Technology*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2025. https://doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/16109.

Bursali, Hamiyet, and Rabia Meryem Yilmaz. "Effect of Augmented Reality Applications on Secondary School Students' Reading Comprehension and Learning Permanency." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 95, 2019, pp. 126–135. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.01.035.

Cheng, Ching-I. "A Study on Learning Analytics of Using Mobile Augmented Reality Application to Enhance Cultural Competence for Design Cultural Creation in Higher Education." *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, vol. 39, no. 6, 2023, pp. 1939–1952. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12855.

Di Fuccio, Raffaele, et al. "Co-Created Augmented Reality App and Its Impact on the Effectiveness of Learning a Foreign Language and on Cultural Knowledge." *Smart Learning Environments*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2024, article 21. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-024-00304-x.

Ebadi, Saman, and Fateme Ashrafabadi. "An Exploration into the Impact of Augmented Reality on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension." *Education and Information Technologies*, vol. 27, no. 7, 2022, pp. 9745–9765. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-11021-8.

Hadjistassou, Stella, and Petros Louca. "Designing Game-Driven Augmented-Reality Scenarios with Real-World Implications to Facilitate Intercultural Exchange: The Alien Scenario." *International Journal of Technology Enhanced Learning*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2024, pp. 27–48. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJTEL.2024.135426.

Hicham, Khalid, et al. "Interculturalizing ELT: Culture-Based Classes to Enhance Language Skills and Intercultural Communicative Competence Dimensions." *Ampersand*, vol. 14, 2025, article 100221. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amper.2025.100221.

Huang, Xinyi, et al. "A Systematic Review of AR and VR Enhanced Language Learning." *Sustainability*, vol. 13, no. 9, 2021, article 4639. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13094639.

Iatsyshyn, Anna V., et al. "Application of Augmented Reality Technologies for Education Projects Preparation." 2020. https://doi.org/10.55056/cte.318.

Khan, Tasneem, et al. "The Impact of an Augmented Reality Application on Learning Motivation of Students." *Advances in Human-Computer Interaction*, vol. 2019, 2019, article 7208494. https://doi.org/10.1155/2019/7208494.

Kumar, Sanjeev, et al. "The Impact of Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality in TNE Learning." *Motivating Engagement, Belonging, and Success in Higher Education Student Experience*, IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2025, pp. 359–382. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-8089-5.ch013.

Lee, Sangmin-Michelle, and Moonyoung Park. "Reconceptualization of the Context in Language Learning with a Location-Based AR App." *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, vol. 33, no. 8, 2020, pp. 936–959. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2019.1602545.

Liu, Song, et al. "Beyond Borders: Exploring the Impact of Augmented Reality on Intercultural Competence and L2 Learning Motivation in EFL Learners." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 14, 2023, article 1234905. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1234905.

Marrahi-Gomez, Victor, and Jose Belda-Medina. "Assessing the Effect of Augmented Reality on English Language Learning and Student Motivation in Secondary Education." *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 9, 2024, article 1359692, https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1359692.

Na'im Rohman, Abu, et al. "The Use of Augmented Reality-Based Learning Media: Arloopa for English Descriptive Text in Secondary School." *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.18196/ftl.v9i1.18789.

Okumuş, Ayşegül, and Perihan Savaş. "Investigating EFL Teacher Candidates' Acceptance and Self-Perceived Self-Efficacy of Augmented Reality." *Education and Information Technologies*, vol. 29, no. 13, 2024, pp. 16571–16596. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-024-12517-1.

Papanastasiou, George, et al. "Virtual and Augmented Reality Effects on K–12, Higher and Tertiary Education Students' Twenty-First Century Skills." *Virtual Reality*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2019, pp. 425–436. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10055-018-0363-2.

Parmaxi, Antigoni, and Alan A. Demetriou. "Augmented Reality in Language Learning: A State-of-the-Art Review of 2014–2019." *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, vol. 36, no. 6, 2020, pp. 861–875. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12486.

Richards, Jack C., and Theodore S. Rodgers. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024532.

Schorr, Isabel, et al. "Foreign Language Learning Using Augmented Reality Environments: A Systematic Review." *Frontiers in Virtual Reality*, vol. 5, 2024, article 1288824. https://doi.org/10.3389/frvir.2024.1288824.

Siregar, Dinda Salsabilah, and Diani Syahputri. "The Effect of Augmented Reality-Based Learning Strategy on EFL Students' Vocabulary Mastery." *Journal of English Language and Education*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2025, pp. 1320–1327. https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i4.1240.

Solak, Ekrem, and Recep Cakir. "Exploring the Effect of Materials Designed with Augmented Reality on Language Learners' Vocabulary Learning." *Journal of Educators Online*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2015, pp. 50–72. https://doi.org/10.9743/JEO.2015.2.5.

Sung, Jung Sun, and Wenhao David Huang. "Digital Learning Innovation: Engineering Students' Learning Motivation for AI Scaffolding." *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 2025, pp. 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-025-10576.

Sushchevskaia, Maia, and Raffaele Di Fuccio. "Navigating between Languages and Cultures: Augmented Reality vs. Traditional Learning." *Journal of Inclusive Methodology and Technology in Learning and Teaching*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2023. https://doi.org/10.32043/jimtlt.v3i4.125.

Trisnawati, Winda, et al. "Systematic Literature Review: 21st-Century English Learning Media Utilizing Augmented Reality." *Vocational: Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2025, pp. 63–73. https://doi.org/10.58740/vocational.v1i2.337.

Wu, Hsin-Kai, et al. "Current Status, Opportunities and Challenges of Augmented Reality in Education." *Computers & Education*, vol. 62, 2013, pp. 41–49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.10.024.

Yadav, Seema. "Transformative Learning with Advanced Technologies: Harnessing VR and AR for Immersive Educational Experiences." *Revolutionizing Pedagogy through Smart Education*, IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2025, pp. 139–156. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-7793-2.

Yousefi, Fariba, and Laleh Fakhraee Faruji. "The Effect of Collaborative, Online Augmented Reality Games on EFL Learners' Speaking Performance and Communication Apprehension." *Journal of New Trends in English Language Learning*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2024. https://doi.org/10.71528/jntell.2024.1119114.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Realism, Sisterhood, and the Moroccan Female Voice: An Interview with Karima Ahdad

**Imane Derrazi and Brahim Barhoun**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.12293

**Imane Derrazi** is a PhD candidate at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, and a member of the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural, and Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab. She obtained her MA degree in "English Literature and History of Ideas" from the same faculty. Her research interests include postcolonial literature, women's writings and narratives, violence, and the intersection of peace and literature.

imane.derrazi1@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4772-3359

**Brahim Barhoun** is a Professor of English Studies in the Department of English Language and Literature at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tétouan, Morocco. He holds a PhD in the Literature of English-speaking Countries from the Complutense University of Madrid. His research interests include postcolonial literature, narrative identity, migration, magical realism, and gender representations, with a focus on African and Arab literary contexts.

bbarhoun@uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6842-7950

Received: 22-11-2025 Accepted: 17-03-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Realism, Sisterhood, and the Moroccan Female Voice: An Interview with Karima Ahdad

**Imane Derrazi and Brahim Barhoun**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

## ABSTRACT

In this interview, Ahdad traces her storytelling roots to her family's Amazigh oral heritage and describes how that inherited orality presses on her written Arabic prose. She reflects on the impact of her journalistic background, her character-driven writing discipline, and the central role of female solidarity in novels such as *Banāt al-Ṣabbār* (*Cactus Girls*) and *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* (*The Other Woman*). Challenging the trope of female rivalry, Ahdad frames patriarchy as the central adversary in her work. The discussion also addresses the balance between realism and social critique, her deliberate choice of Arabic over French or English, the possibilities of translation, as well as the digital demands on contemporary writers. Throughout the interview, Ahdad explains that authentic local storytelling serves as a vital tool for survival and universal human connection.

## KEYWORDS

**Moroccan Literature**

**Female Solidarity**

**Social Realism**

**Patriarchy**

**Arabic Fiction**

*This interview was conducted in English.*



**About Karima Ahdad:** Karima Ahdad is a novelist and former journalist from Al Hoceima, in the Rif region of northern Morocco. She studied print journalism at the Higher Institute of Information and Communication in Rabat and worked for Moroccan newspapers and online platforms before leaving the field for literature. Her works include three novels: *Banāt al-Ṣabbār* (*Cactus Girls*, 2018), *Ḥulm Turkī* (*A Turkish Dream*, 2021), and *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* (*The Other Woman*, 2024), and several short story collections. Ahdad's latest works include another short story collection titled *Jurhun Asfala al-Batn* (*A Wound in the Lower Belly*, 2026). She won the Moroccan Writers' Union Prize for Young Writers in 2016 for her first short story collection, and her work has appeared in English, Spanish, and Slovenian.

Contact ✉ imane.derrazi1@etu.uae.ac.ma ✉ bbarhoun@uae.ac.ma
©2026

**Imane Derrazi:** How did your journey as a writer begin? Was it a dream you had since you were a child, or was it an ambition that grew over time?

**Karima Ahdad:** I began writing at a young age. At the time, it wasn't a dream or an ambition, but rather an instinctive outpouring of feelings, images, and stories that stirred within me. I found myself putting them into words in an old school notebook on the rooftop of our home in Al Hoceima. Perhaps I was influenced by the stories I heard from my grandmothers and the women around me, as well as the children's books I read. Or perhaps a love of storytelling is something inherited in our family. My mother, my grandmothers, and the women in our family are all gifted storytellers who cherish stories, each in her own way.

Over time, my love for storytelling grew and gradually evolved from the oral to the written. I began reading books and novels, discovering different literary forms along the way. During my teenage years, I started dreaming of becoming a writer. I wrote long pieces, though I'm not sure whether to call them long stories or short novels, before turning to short fiction, and eventually entering the vast and fascinating world of the novel.

**ID:** How has your career in journalism influenced the way you observe, research, and craft your fiction?

**KA:** I wouldn't say that journalism shaped my path as a writer, because I chose journalism in the first place out of my love for writing and my belief that it was the field closest to it. I even specialized in print journalism during my studies at the Higher Institute of Information and Communication in Rabat, and I worked for Moroccan newspapers and online platforms, focusing on major journalistic genres that allow for a certain degree of literary skill, such as reportage, profiles, interviews, and analytical articles.

At the same time, a writer is inevitably influenced by the experiences they go through, the people they encounter, and the things they see and hear. These details can find their way into their writing, consciously or not. Since I write realist literature, my experience as a journalist—going out into the field, traveling to different regions to produce reportages, interviewing various individuals, and writing profiles about them—has likely added depth and richness to my work.

The paradox is that journalism, at least in my own experience, is exhausting and consuming. That is why I decided to leave the field and focus my creative and writing efforts on literature.

**ID:** What was the definitive spark that launched your journey as a novelist, and how do you feel your creative voice has evolved from *Banāt al-Ṣabbār* (*Cactus Girls*) to *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* (*The Other Woman*)?

**KA:** Winning the Moroccan Writers' Union Prize for Young Writers in 2016 for my first short story collection was my first real push as a writer. It brought me out of a dark room where I used to write alone, with only my friends and relatives as readers, into the light, into a wider circle of readers. I still remember the sense of pride I felt seeing my name on the cover of a book, but also the sense of responsibility: a responsibility toward myself, as a writer who must continue on this path.

In 2018, I published my novel *Banāt al-Ṣabbār*, which I consider the true turning point in my journey as a writer. I felt supported by established and renowned writers who read the novel with care and encouraged me to publish it. It was, of course, my first experience in novel writing, and I believe that writing novels is something that is refined through continuous work, reading, and lived experience. It is always evolving. What I have never abandoned in my writing,

from *Banāt al-Ṣabbār* to *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra*, and what I later came to realize as its essence, is sincerity, along with a constant desire to learn and grow.

**ID:** You have been remarkably prolific, publishing three novels and several short stories within seven years. Could you reflect on your writing discipline? Do you maintain a structured routine, or do you prefer to write in response to moments of inspiration?
**KA:** I wake up every day at six in the morning, sometimes a little before or after, to write. I write consistently, even when I don't feel inspired, and I read constantly, even if it's just ten or twenty pages a day. Neither work, nor obligations, nor difficulties have ever stopped me from writing. I deeply believe that discipline is the only way for a person to become a writer.

**ID:** When starting a new work, do you meticulously map out the plot and character arcs, or do you allow the narrative to unfold organically as you write?
**KA:** I always begin with an outline, especially when it comes to a novel, but I often stray from it. Once the characters fully take shape, they begin to take control of their own destinies, leading me to places I never expected and territories I have not personally experienced. Storytelling is a process of discovery. Let's say, then, that I create an outline in order to begin writing, but once I start walking along its mysterious and winding path, I don't know whether I'll encounter a bear or a snake, or find a breathtaking garden unlike anything I've ever seen before.

**ID:** Across your three novels, female relationships seem to form the primary axis of the story; brothers and father figures are often peripheral or absent. Is that a conscious structural decision, and what does centering those female-only spaces let you do that a more mixed dynamic would not?
**KA:** I grew up surrounded by women. I have seven sisters, and in my family, women were storytellers who loved telling stories. They taught me this passion, or perhaps I inherited it from them. I always had the impression that what is written about women is often far removed from their real worlds, from what they share among themselves, and from their inner lives and experiences. Moreover, I am, first and foremost, a woman and a writer deeply drawn to realist literature; I write about what I know. It feels only natural, then, that I write about women's experiences from my position as a woman.

Men are not absent from my work—quite the opposite. They are present even in their absence, powerfully and profoundly, through the impact that absence leaves on women's inner lives. In *Banāt al-Ṣabbār*, for instance, the father dies at the beginning of the story; he is physically absent throughout, yet he remains present through memory and through the effect of his absence on the lives of his wife and daughters. In *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra*, there are prominent male characters, such as Saad, Sheherazade's husband, as well as the publisher she works with, among others. The father is absent here as well, having died when Sheherazade was seven, yet his profound influence on his daughter continues to shape her and reappears throughout the novel as she remembers him.

There is another point I would like to make in this regard: men are rarely asked why they choose male or even female protagonists in their works, whereas we, as women, are constantly questioned about this choice, as though we must prove that what we write is worthy of being considered literature.

**ID:** Your writing vividly captures lived realities and broader social experiences. Do you view fiction primarily as a mirror of reality? Beyond reflecting society, how can literature actively intervene in or reshape those realities?
**KA:** Of course, literature is a mirror of reality, but it is equally a reflection of history. We do not remember what politicians and rulers said about people centuries ago, but we do remember what stories and narratives said about them. Political statements, slogans, and falsehoods disappear, while literature and stories endure. Through them, we come to know the concerns of people in the past, their dreams and their suffering.

How do we understand life in nineteenth-century Russia? What about France? What do we know about the lives and hardships people endured after the French Revolution? Aren't the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and Victor Hugo the very images we carry of those periods in history?

**ID:** Coming from a conservative Riffian background, how do you navigate the "freedom of the pen" when addressing sensitive topics such as the body, sexuality, and patriarchal constraints?
**KA:** I believe that freedom is one of the fundamental pillars of writing, the freedom to think, to create, and to imagine. When I write, I do not think of anyone, and I try as much as possible not to impose self-censorship on myself. Not thinking of an imagined reader is, of course, no easy task; I don't believe there is any writer who does not, at some point, consider how readers might judge their work, whether it will be good enough or not. A good writer is, by necessity, someone who doubts themselves and constantly reexamines their work. Yet this should not overshadow a deeper, essential belief in the necessity of writing in one's life. Honest writing that fears nothing, writing that unsettles, that disturbs, and that digs into the deepest wounds.

**ID:** Themes of patriarchy, inheritance, and displacement feature prominently across your body of work. How do you balance the drive for social critique with the need to maintain a compelling, artistic narrative?
**KA:** We do not write novels with the aim of changing the world or advocating for specific causes. Yet, by telling a story rooted in reality, we inevitably engage with themes and issues that touch human life in both its simple and complex forms. For instance, in *Banāt al-Ṣabbār*, I tell the story of a family of women, a mother and her daughters, after the death of the father, their sole provider. The novel portrays how this family becomes vulnerable to displacement due to laws that grant the deceased's brothers a share of the inheritance when the deceased leaves only daughters.

As you've noticed, this issue remains a sensitive and widely debated one in Moroccan society. However, conveying it through a story, through the voices of these women, from their perspectives, within a literary and creative text, gives it different dimensions. It grants it a power that other forms of discourse may not possess: the power of empathy.

For me, then, the novel, and storytelling more broadly, has a deeper role than merely providing entertainment or advocating for specific causes. It is about creating empathy between human beings.

**ID:** Your latest short story, "A Slender Thorn Digs Deep into My Foot," offers a poignant portrayal of Alzheimer's. What does the short story form allow you to explore that a novel might not? Are there themes or subjects you feel are better suited to one form rather than the other?
**KA:** I feel that the short story is sharper than the novel, precisely because it is shorter. Its sentences must be more powerful, condensed, and precise. It says many things within a very

limited space. In my case, I don't consciously choose whether a subject is better suited to a novel or a short story; rather, the nature of the idea itself determines the most fitting form.

In "A Slender Thorn Digs Deep into My Foot," I knew from the beginning that I wanted to write a short story. The idea came like a spark of inspiration, and I found myself writing and completing it in a single sitting.

In the short story, the narrative time span is not very long, and there are not many characters. Every sentence and every word must contribute strongly to the progression of the story and the development of the character. A novel, on the other hand, can unfold over a long period of time and can involve many characters shaping its development.

I am currently writing a novel set in Al Hoceima across two different time periods, the 1950s and the early 2000s. It tells the story of two girls from different generations, but it is also a portrait of the city across these periods. I don't think I could achieve this in a short story, because I need a wide space to build my world and make it convincing and cohesive for a reader who may know nothing about this city, its social and historical richness, the hardships it has gone through, and the ways it can intersect with other marginalized regions of the world.

**ID:** In *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra*, you delve deeply into the psychological struggles of Sheherazade. Why did you choose this iconic name, and what are the implications of invoking the *One Thousand and One Nights* legacy in a modern, psychological context?
**KA:** Sheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights* told stories to save herself from Shahryar, to stay alive. But Sheherazade in *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* tells her story to save herself from herself, from her psychological struggles, her failures and frustrations, from corruption, and from the judgments of society.

In my own life, storytelling has always been synonymous with survival. The women I grew up among, simple women, turned to it, perhaps unconsciously, as a way to preserve their culture from disappearance. Amazigh women, and Moroccan women more broadly, have safeguarded their cultural heritage through storytelling and oral narratives. They told stories to survive their reality, to live, and to endure forever.

**ID:** Beyond Sheherazade, how do you select the names for your characters? Do they carry symbolic weight, or are they chosen to reflect a specific social realism?
**KA:** I always choose the names of my characters carefully, as part of the elements that reflect the geographical and cultural setting of the story. In *Banāt al-Ṣabbār*, for example, the mother's name is Louiza, a name common in the Rif region, particularly in Al Hoceima, among a certain generation of women. I have never, for instance, heard this name in Casablanca, which is why I would not have chosen it for Sheherazade, the protagonist of *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra*, whose story takes place in Casablanca.

I believe that character names are an important element in achieving cohesion and realism in a story.

**ID:** Besides their names, your characters are often described as "sharp and real." What is your process for crafting characters with such sensory depth that the reader can visualize, see, and hear them so clearly?
**KA:** As I mentioned earlier, characters grow and develop as the story unfolds. Once they are fully formed, it becomes difficult for me to control them because they begin to act according to their own instincts, responding in ways that align with the overall logical arc of their story. If a fictional character is well-built and cohesive, they become realistic and convincing to the reader, even if the reader disagrees with their ideas, actions, or viewpoints. In fact, the reader may even empathize with them, understand them, and accept their behavior, choices, and mistakes.

**ID:** Women's writing is often unfairly reduced to "fictional biography" or a mere extension of the author's life. What is your take on this association? How much of your work is an extraction of self versus a construction of "the other"?
**KA:** This is merely a way to cast doubt on women's ability for creativity and imagination. But those who make such claims do not realize that autobiography is a literary genre that also requires imagination and creativity! I no longer feel the need to defend myself when asked whether my novels relate to my life, nor do I feel ashamed that I draw inspiration for my stories, themes, ideas, and narrative seeds from my own life, reality, past, and memory. On the contrary, I feel proud that writing makes it impossible to distinguish between reality and imagination, between what actually happened and what did not.

This is something I myself am never entirely sure of. I believe there are things I have written, thinking they sprang purely from imagination, that actually happened and remained lodged in my subconscious and deep memory. That, for me, is the magic of writing.

**ID:** In *Banāt al-Ṣabbār*, there is no "Hollywood ending"; redemption instead emerges through sisterhood and mutual support. How do you approach the theme of sisterhood and female relationships in your work?
**KA:** There is a common belief that "women are women's enemies," implying that women harbor feelings of hatred, envy, or malice toward one another, and that they undermine themselves and each other. In my view, this statement is not only incorrect but also dangerous, because it distorts reality and misrepresents the truth.

The truth, as I have observed in my own life and in the environment where I grew up, is that women, even the simplest, most uneducated, and poorest among them, stood in solidarity with one another in critical moments and helped each other in times of difficulty. When a woman gave birth, neighbors and family women would rush to her aid and prepare meals for her. When a woman fell ill, it was entirely natural for neighbors to come help with cleaning and childcare. My grandmother, who spent much of her life in the village, fought for my sisters and me to have the right to education, and the women in my family sympathized with one another in pain, grief, and death, or when they were wronged by their husbands or fathers.

I grew up hearing claims that women enjoy harassment or even seek it to feel desired. This idea shocked me, because I have never met a woman who wants to be harassed. Women always showed understanding toward one another in these situations, and often defended each other when such incidents occurred.

A woman's enemy is not another woman; it is the patriarchal mindset, which both men and women can internalize. It is the same mentality that tries to distort reality and replace it with cheap, stereotypical images.

**ID:** What informed your decision to write primarily in Arabic? How does the language shape the nuances of the Moroccan stories you tell?
**KA:** Arabic was the first language I learned after my mother tongue, Amazigh. Of course, when I was in school, Amazigh had not yet become an official language, so it was only the language of conversation, of the streets, and of oral storytelling. I learned to write for the first time in Arabic, and it was through Arabic that I discovered literature. Although I later learned French and English, mastered them, and read extensively in them, Arabic had already chosen me, and that was that.

I do not, of course, think in only one language; I think in all the languages I know, and then I translate them into Arabic, which, with its richness and beauty, allows me to express all the languages within me, the languages through which I learned about life.

**ID:** Excerpts of your work have already appeared in English, Spanish, and Slovenian. What is it like to read your own sentences rearranged in another language, and are there full translations currently in progress?
**KA:** It is an incredible feeling for a writer to sense that their readership is expanding to include other parts of the world, other cultures. Every reader adds something to the text through their reading, understanding, and perception, so imagine what it means when that reader comes from a completely different culture, from a distant part of the world. It is a unique experience.
*Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* is now being translated into Slovenian by the wonderful translator Barbara Skubic, and it will be published this year by the Slovenian publishing house Hirondelle.

**ID:** As an active author on social media, how do you think those platforms contribute to promoting literary works and helping them reach a wider audience?
**KA:** I always say that these platforms are a double-edged sword. On one hand, they can help promote literary works by spreading them to wider audiences and reaching a larger base of readers among their users. On the other hand, they can become a maze, posing yet another challenge. Creating content about books for social media requires a writer to devote part of their time to producing this material, which may not receive the attention it hopes for, or may be swallowed by the fast-paced, consumptive nature of these platforms.

Here I raise an important question: Is a writer obliged to focus solely on their literary production, or should they dive into these platforms with all the effort, competitiveness, and speed in creation and publication that they demand? Doesn't this pace conflict with the very nature of literary work, which calls for patience and reflection?

**ID:** How do you perceive the current state of the literary space in Morocco? Which local writers, past or present, have had the most profound impact on your own work?
**KA:** I have read many Moroccan authors, and their works have profoundly influenced me. To name just a few: Fatima Mernissi, Mohammed Choukri, Abdelkader Chaoui, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Malika Moustadraf, and Mohammed Zafzaf.

**ID:** While your work is deeply rooted in Morocco, the struggles of your characters resonate globally. Do you write with a specific local audience in mind, or are you addressing a universal female experience?
**KA:** I always say that a writer must start from the local in order to reach the universal. Our human pains, dreams, and fears are the same, no matter where we are in the world. We all seek love, and we all fear death and the unknown. This is the essential function of literature: it connects us to others, no matter how different they are from us. The situation of women is just one of these representations. Patriarchal mindsets, gender discrimination, and the struggle for women's rights and dignity are universal issues. Morocco is no different from France, America, or Japan in this regard.

I have read the novels of Elfriede Jelinek and found myself in them, even though they explore the condition of women in twentieth-century Austrian society. I have also found myself in the writings of Erica Jong, who writes about American society. The temporal and geographical contexts, of course, differ, as do the details and perhaps even the intensity, but the suffering and aspirations remain the same.

**ID:** Your new short story collection, *Jurhun Asfala al-Batn* (*A Wound in the Lower Belly*), has just appeared with Almutawassit Publications in Italy and was recently showcased at the Rabat International Book Fair. The title points to a wound that is intimate, bodily, and hidden from view. What binds the stories of this collection together, and why did you return to the short story after three novels? Does this book mark a shift in your concerns, or does it dig deeper into the wounds you have been writing about all along?

**KA:** *Jurhun Asfala al-Batn* is a phrase borrowed from one of the stories in the collection, the one that gives the book its title, but it captures the atmosphere of the whole text. It is the thread that ties all the stories together, because at their core these are stories about humanity's first wound: the wound of birth. The wound of coming into this world, and the wound of bringing others into it, this vast, complicated, frightening world.

Birth is never merely a biological event. It can leave scars on the soul that never heal, and that is the spirit running through these stories. Beyond that, the collection takes up other concerns as well, through the lives of women bound together by a grinding search for their own identity and for some meaning to their lives, in a society that swings between clinging to the old customs and longing for modern ways of living, with all the freedom and individuality those promise.

As always, I worked in a register that joins realism to irony, in order to bring out the estrangement of the individual in our contemporary world, and to go down into the strangeness and complexity of the human soul.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# Memory, City, and the Poetics of the Historical Novel: An Interview with Mohamed El Ftouh on *Diwan Al-Ahali*

**Brahim Barhoun and Zineb Duali**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.12294

**Brahim Barhoun** is a Professor of English Studies in the Department of English Language and Literature at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tétouan, Morocco. He holds a PhD in the Literature of English-speaking Countries from the Complutense University of Madrid. His research interests include postcolonial literature, narrative identity, migration, magical realism, and gender representations, with a focus on African and Arab literary contexts.

bbarhoun@uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6842-7950

**Zineb Duali** is a researcher at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tetouan, Morocco. She holds an MA in Interdisciplinary Studies in English Language, Culture, and Literature from the Faculty of Letters and Humanities at the same university. Her research interests include memory studies, trauma studies, and postcolonial Moroccan literature.

zineb.duali@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8964-2751

Received: 16-04-2025 Accepted: 24-06-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Memory, City, and the Poetics of the Historical Novel: An Interview with Mohamed El Ftouh on *Diwan Al-Ahali*

**Brahim Barhoun and Zineb Duali**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

## ABSTRACT

This interview offers a sustained critical engagement with Mohamed El Ftouh's debut novel *Diwan Al-Ahali* (2023), a 508-page historical narrative centered on the city of Tetouan and the collective memory of its people across several generations. Across a wide-ranging series of exchanges, El Ftouh articulates a poetics of historical fiction grounded in what he terms the "aesthetic wager" of the novel, namely its capacity to interpret and fill the silences of the historical archive without falsifying it. The conversation traverses key critical questions: the relationship between fiction and historiography, the city as novelistic character, the function of detail in narrative realism, the Andalusian-Morisco heritage as a structural rather than ornamental presence, the politics of memory in a post-colonial Moroccan context, and the ethics of representing the marginalized and the forgotten. The novelist reflects on the craft decisions that shaped his work, while resisting the reduction of the novel to either historical testimony or ideological statement. The interview contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about the Moroccan novel, the literary cartography of the Moroccan north, and the narrative construction of urban and collective memory in contemporary Arabic fiction.

## KEYWORDS

**Moroccan Novel**

**Historical Fiction**

**Narrative Memory**

**Tetouan**

***Diwan Al-Ahali***

**Arabic Literature**

*The following interview was originally conducted in Arabic. It has been translated into English by the interviewers.*

## Introduction

Mohamed El Ftouh is a Moroccan novelist whose debut novel *Diwan Al-Ahali* (2023) constitutes a significant contribution to contemporary Moroccan Arabic fiction. Published by a Moroccan press, the novel spans 508 pages and follows the intergenerational history of a family from Tetouan, a city whose Andalusian-Morisco heritage, colonial history, and cultural depth have remained largely marginal in both Moroccan and wider Arabic literary criticism.

What distinguishes *Diwan Al-Ahali* within the current landscape of the Moroccan novel is not only its ambition of scale, a multigenerational saga structured around the voices of multiple narrators, but its deliberate negotiation of the tension between fictional imagination and historical responsibility. El Ftouh refuses the role of the prescriptive historian while equally refusing the alibi of pure aestheticism. His novel occupies what the critic Abdullah Ibrahim has called the space of historical fiction: a textual practice that employs the archive as a resource rather than a constraint, and that mobilizes narrative to give voice to histories of displacement,

Contact ✉ bbarhoun@uae.ac.ma ✉ zineb.duali@etu.uae.ac.ma

©2026

famine, colonial encounter, and cultural resistance that official historiography has systematically marginalized.



The city of Tetouan functions in the novel not as backdrop but as protagonist: a palimpsest of Andalusian memory, Moroccan modernity, and colonial rupture. This is consistent with a broader tendency in postcolonial Moroccan fiction to recenter peripheral urban spaces, the Rif, the north, the medina, against the centrist cultural geographies that have historically dominated both Francophone and Arabophone literary production in Morocco. *Diwan Al-Ahali* can thus be read as a contribution to the literary cartography of Moroccan regionalism, a movement that asserts the specificity of local cultural memory against both colonial and post-independence homogenizing narratives.

The following interview, conducted for Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, moves from El Ftouh's beginnings as a writer through questions of scale and form, the relation of fiction to history, the place of Tetouan and the family within the text, and on to character, time, detail, and language, the colonial experience, the sources behind the book, and, finally, its reception and the horizons of the work to come.

## The Interview

**Brahim Barhoun:** Let me start away from the book. Age, profession, credentials: none of that reaches the person. Who is Mohamed El Ftouh underneath what a résumé would report?
**Mohamed El Ftouh:** First, let me thank you, and thank the journal and the research laboratory, for opening this conversation around the novel. Now, to your question, which is the hardest kind precisely because a résumé cannot answer it. What data records stays on the surface. It says nothing of the core. And introspection, the attempt to reach one's inner self, is difficult for any writer asked to introduce himself from the inside. So I will put it simply: I am a child of storytelling who refuses to grow up. Childhood is the spiritual, mystical time of every writer, and I have never left it.

**BB:** Where did the writing itself begin? What form came first?
**ME:** Again in childhood, in early adolescence. The first form was the letter, letters to my father, who had emigrated, and to neighbors and friends. Youth brought a wave of poetic and romantic feeling. Then came short, open, hybrid pieces still hunting for a voice. Out of those grew the first real attempts to write a story, and to write the self, memory, the world.

**BB:** And what turned those attempts into an actual novel? You mentioned you were nearly fifty.
**ME:** I was. And I put a question to myself before I began: am I ready to write a novel? What would I add? If I write it, what makes it a proposition and not just another book? Behind that question stood years of wide reading, steady writing, and slow reflection on Arab and world literature. I will admit, too, that writing on social media and literary sites helped me find my path and my narrative voice.

**BB:** Was there a decisive influence, a particular writer or book that shaped that voice?
**ME:** No single name, no pivotal book. It happened by accumulation. Every stage of life had its own authors and its own enchantments, and with the years, with maturity, one simply grows more practiced in books, in technique, in language and its beauty.

**BB:** Let's turn to *Diwan Al-Ahali* itself. Did you choose this subject, or did it choose you? And behind that, what does the novel mean to you as a way of standing toward the world?
**ME:** The novel is a stance toward the world, with an ethical horizon and an aesthetic wager. It is the imagined arena where the writer's struggle against fate and against the flaws of existence plays out. So it is a cognitive, cultural, and aesthetic stance at once, reaching to hold human experience. To call it a stance means, of course, a conscious choice about how to engage that experience through narrative.

**BB:** Give us the book in brief. What does it recount at its core, and where did the title come from?
**ME:** It tries to represent, through fiction and interpretation, the tragedies of Tetouan's people across particular historical moments: their exile and instability, the sense of impermanence, the weight of time, their fragmentation. And their refusal of ruin, their steadfastness against horrors, whether famine, natural disaster, epidemic, or war. In short, it gestures toward the pioneering role of the city and its people in collective life, civic, cultural, civilizational. As for the title: diwan means, among other things, a council or assembly; al-ahali means the people of the city. The title carries both.

**BB:** That word *diwan* does a lot of work. There's the real place in Tetouan, and there's the poetic charge the word holds in Arabic. Was the doubling deliberate?
**ME:** Fully deliberate. Beyond council and assembly, *diwan* also names a salon, a body of scribes, and, as everyone knows, a collection of poems. So the title yields the sense of a cultural salon, with all its civilizational resonance. Tetouan, with its deep Andalusian-Morisco-Mediterranean heritage, has long been known for pioneering cultural, literary, and artistic work.

**BB:** How would you want it read, then: as a book about memory, a book about history, or an open narrative experience?
**ME:** Before anything, as a work of fiction with an aesthetic and interpretive dimension. When it touches history or memory, it does so to throw light on the human condition, on human fates and their crises. Moving between past and present, the novel keeps its eye on what existence and time do to a person. It leans toward sensation and the warmth of longing rather than cold historical knowledge, trying to make an alternative human reality, one a little more beautiful and less brutal than the one we are given.

**BB:** Some readers might call it a foundational novel in the strong sense, a text that hands a community an identity-forming story. Would you accept that description?
**ME:** I can't claim it. This is my first narrative proposition, with all its gaps and limits, and I won't call it foundational to any project, not now. It is a modest suggestion among the visions of other Tetouani writers. And yet I do think it stands as a narrative identity in its own right, a narrative truth reaching for a second articulation of historical existence through an intense engagement with language, guided by an interpretive vision drawn from knowledge, culture, and values.

**BB:** For a first novel, 508 pages is a long breath. Did the material force that length on you, or was it a decision made in advance?
**ME:** Not planned at all. The work imposed its own length as it branched and extended during the writing. Behind any novel, layers of knowledge and sensibility surface and press themselves on the writer. This one began with a single chapter, "Al-Ghali," a grandson who sets out to write his family's history after recording a conversation with his grandfather. When I saw the story widening to take in ancestors across different times, places, and characters, well past what one grandson's wish could hold, I stopped for a long while and went back to reading novels and history, until the final form arrived.

**BB:** That long breath is often tied to the epic novel, the kind that tries to hold a whole society. Do you place yourself in that lineage consciously?
**ME:** I do. Most of what I read pulls that way, and even in film I prefer the grand narrative, long stories of long stretches of time, tangled events, human fates. It has always drawn me. Perhaps it is in the great sagas that we come nearest to grasping humanity's endless struggle against everything that threatens its existence, material and symbolic.

**BB:** Did you ever think of breaking the material into volumes rather than one continuous book?
**ME:** A novelist friend suggested exactly that when he read the manuscript. The thought never occurred to me on my own, though I knew the difficulty. It was an adventure, like putting out into a great sea. A wager. I chose one complete, continuous novel, so as not to lose that single emotional surge I felt all through the preparation and the writing.

**BB:** And the practical craft problem underneath scale: how did you keep historical detail from swallowing narrative pace? How do you stop the detail becoming a weight?
**ME:** That is a challenge for any novelist, to hold narrative material and artistic form in balance without one crushing the other. Writing a novel is laborious enough; keeping that harmony between historical sensibility and the sensitivity of the artistic focus is more exhausting still. With detail specifically, the guard against excess is sustained reflection. If a detail will burden the narrative, there is no harm in withholding it. The work is to watch them so they never turn dissonant or excessive. Their presence has to serve the content, or it has no business being there.

**BB:** This is maybe the central tension in the book. Where do you draw the line between fiction and historical fact? Is the novel a way of writing history, or a path running alongside it?
**ME:** First and last it is an artistic, fictional, interpretive work. Even as a form of social representation, it uses history to serve its aesthetic wager above all. Through its own vision the novel has to win its battle with the historical dimension, pull it onto its own ground, and refuse to stop at merely repeating what happened. History books are full of what occurred; the novel has to tell us, through fiction, how it happened, and what else might have. That is where the novelist makes up for the historian's shortfall. It makes the novel a path parallel to history, not a species of it. The novel has its mechanisms; history has its tools and methods. This is close to what Abdullah Ibrahim means by historical fiction: the novel interprets history without falsifying it, fills the silences the historian left, and, through its aesthetic dimension, reaches past history to gather in the forgotten and the marginalized. It is a way of democratizing a history that has fixed its attention on great events rather than on humanity's ordinary, permanent struggle and estrangement.

**BB:** You mention filling silences. How do you handle the archive's gaps, the periods where the documentation simply isn't there? Is fiction restoring something, or inventing it?
**ME:** It fills the void. Life, they say, will not tolerate emptiness. Think of early man before the vast blank of his surroundings, that terrifying void that drove the cave dweller, at the edge of nothingness, to take an ember or a stone and draw the beasts around him on the wall. That is where the necessity of fiction comes from. If creative imagination does not fill the void, meaninglessness will. The novelist completes the blank the historian leaves, mainly through fiction, and that fiction is never separable from his own knowledge, culture, and interpretive strategy.

**BB:** There is a risk on the other side, though: that a reader takes the book as literal testimony. And I want to fold in a related question, because the two sit together. Does a post-colonial consciousness, the reclaiming of the narrative from colonial discourse, run through your writing of Tetouan's history?
**ME:** As a novelist, I don't dwell on what a reader might extract, because the text resists any single ready-made reading. It is not a literal transcription of history. Where it meets historical events, that comes from respect for the time of their occurrence, nothing more. Following Ibrahim's line of thought, I was not writing the history of Tetouan but a narrative moment drawn from it, from a literary and aesthetic standpoint. My task was not the prescriptive historian's, nor the researcher's countering colonial discourse. It was simply the novelist's, faithful to his craft.

**BB:** A reader may reach for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a family traced across time. How do you see that comparison?
**ME:** A surprising question. The reader is free to compare, but for my part I would be ashamed to set my book beside so towering a work. I read García Márquez more than twenty years ago and have forgotten much of it. Still, one distinction matters: Macondo is an imagined place on a riverbank; Tetouan is a living, material city. What might link the two in atmosphere, strange diseases, misery, isolation, floods, the unavoidable meeting with death, perhaps belongs to what Unamuno called the tragic sense of life. In that sense the frame of my novel is the tragic destiny of the human being, the power of fate over human lives.

**BB:** There's a structural device worth naming here. The book doesn't restore memory in its official form; it re-articulates it through a tape recorder and through several voices, Sheikh Mahfouz with his oral, fragmented telling, Al-Ghali directing the narration, Tawfiq listening and reassembling. Transferring the authority of narration from official history to the people: was that an epistemic and political choice as much as an aesthetic one?
**ME:** It was. The novel presents itself as an epistemic and, yes, political stance that works to reorganize the world and give it meaning within an ethical horizon. To your point exactly: the book wins out over official history through Tawfiq's decision to write the novel from the audio archive between the grandson Al-Ghali and the grandfather Mahfouz, rather than finish his academic thesis. The victory runs through a governing idea that re-articulates existence, gathers the scattered, orders it, gives it coherent form. Its authority brings the vanished voices back to life and breathes into the bare skeleton of history.

**BB:** And how do you verify historical accuracy without letting the novel harden into a reference work?
**ME:** History sits in the novel only as background serving the narrative, while I still respect the accuracy of the facts, which is not hard to check against history books and their sources. No one needs to doubt the date the Spanish armies entered during the War of Tetouan, the fourth of February, 1860. But the novel passes over such facts lightly. It does not halt at them as though they were the main station. It moves past them into the human concern, carrying us from the flatness of objective data to the warmth of human feeling.

**BB:** The city is clearly more than a setting. Start with what it is to you personally, existentially, and how that feeling became a reason to write.
**ME:** One of the things that pushed me to write was a kind of debt, to give back some of what Tetouan has given me, its human, existential, cultural, aesthetic gifts. The city is those memories that never leave me be. It is a wound left open. It is the material, symbolic, aesthetic space where I question and search for myself through language, through writing. An intense and complicated existential condition.

**BB:** So how does it cross over, in the novel, from setting into an active force in the telling?
**ME:** Beyond its living architecture, the squares and arches and alleyways and fountains, the city is a symbolic cultural field in which the self recognizes and questions itself. The novel says at one point that cities resemble their people and people resemble their cities. There is a spirit behind everything material in a city, one we feel without being able to fix. The city grants no peace to whoever loves it, least of all to the writer, who drags it out of its static state into a dynamic, meaningful one by giving it cultural, human, intellectual depth. To make it active is to move it from silent nature to speaking nature.

**BB:** Would you go so far as to say Tetouan is a character, with a voice and a dramatic arc of its own?
**ME:** Yes, that is what I was after. I tried to hand the city the role of protagonist, to make it a character and an open memory. Mohamed Berrada once wrote of it that Tetouan is a city that does not die, that it rediscovers itself with each new generation. That is the sense I wanted, the city as a living, vital element in the narrative, in its aesthetic and its dramatic dimensions both, so as to catch that secret in it that does not surrender itself easily.

**BB:** You track the city through its architectural and urban change. How does that physical transformation become a narrative language for social and political change?
**ME:** The city's urban shifts demand shifts in the form and scale of the narrative. Moving through nineteenth-century Tetouan, the novel took a framework resembling the period in its social and political life, the old walled medina with its gates and its close, cohesive interior spaces. With the Protectorate, the building of the colonial city, and the rise of mixed neighborhoods outside the walls, that change had to register in the social order and its values too.

**BB:** And why the family as your way into all of this? Why read the city through one lineage?
**ME:** First, to reflect the tight, solid identity between family and city. Then to follow the family's fates in migration, in its passage from stability out toward the unknown, where nothing holds and chance rules. And finally to show how the city becomes an active being that shapes the successive characters across generations and answers them back.

**BB:** Are you drawing on personal memory there, or on a wider collective representation? And were you conscious of the old idea that the family, in literature, works as a mirror of the larger social order?
**ME:** Umberto Eco wrote that memory is the soul, and since we are speaking of the city, memory here is that collective "we" that fuses the shared identity, where the personal blends into the general. It is a dialectical representation reaching to make a new memory, one aware of time and resistant to erasure. As for the family's analytical function, I do not treat the novel as a mere prescriptive tale that carries reality across as it is. It holds knowledge and value structures and works to persuade through its discourse. It mirrors our psychological, intellectual, social preoccupations, and at the same time it must be seen as a narrative truth in itself, not just a reflection of the writer's biography.

**BB:** The extended-family novel has a long lineage, Mann, García Márquez, Mahfouz. Do you write with that tradition, or against it?
**ME:** As I said, the pull of grand narratives comes from no single author but from the openness of narrative experience in all its variety. What the extended-family novel offers in particular is the chance to trace human tragedies and weigh fates in their link to what came before and what carried them onward.

**BB:** And the tensions inside a family, across generations, between the sexes, between what's inherited and what's new, how do you hold those without the book collapsing into an ideological statement?
**ME:** That rests on the artistic vision, on the narrative wager's ability to give aesthetic form to all that conflict, so the crystallization, in meaning and in structure, becomes an absorbing, persuasive discourse rather than sliding into prescriptive didacticism.

**BB:** Where do your characters come from, reality or invention?
**ME:** From the space between the two. They came from the spectres of reality and are, at the same time, imagined, shaped through language. They moved from the level of reality to the level of creativity, of imagination and interpretation, though their origins run back to the tangle of human reality. They are neither transplanted whole from life nor conjured out of nothing. They are generated beings that live in the middle zone, in the expanse of literature, hybrid things, shadows and human echoes remade through imagination. Characters that create the illusion of the real without being it.

**BB:** Is there something specific to the Tetouani character as it comes through in the work?
**ME:** What marks it is the blend of Andalusian-Morisco origin with a deep Moroccan spirit. Pride in a distinctive identity alongside national belonging. Cultural, artistic, literary, scientific depth. A history of pioneering across many fields, founding schools and institutes and cultural clubs. Civility, moderation, openness, a love of beauty and of the arts. The historian Mohamed Daoud caught this character precisely when he wrote that the city knew how to live with dignity and good repute, that little was enough for it, that its work was precise and ordered, and that its people were therefore safe, at peace, content.

**BB:** Do you grant your characters autonomy inside the narrative, or do they stay under your control throughout?
**ME:** The writer, great deceiver that he is, is still subject to the authority of writing. Creation has its own secret magic. There are things that surface for a writer only in the act itself, a state

of devotion in which ideas and images clarify and reveal themselves. Generally the writer makes his characters and sets their contexts and outcomes. But it can happen, through the sheer force and openness of writing, that events and characters pull him into territory other than what he assigned them, imposing themselves, charting a changed path, still under his watch.

**BB:** Are there characters who hold views far from your own? How did you give them internal credibility without identifying with them?
**ME:** Their credibility rests on what I call sincere creativity, the innocence of creativity as against its naivety, and the two differ greatly. Innocence goes with the force and commitment of what one writes. I write in sincerity, not pretence. As for characters whose views don't align with mine, that is nothing but faithfulness to literature and to life in all its multiplicity. We do not write about ourselves. We turn our experience into narrative material that represents human society in all its branches and variations.

**BB:** How did you handle the movement between periods without the narrative coming apart? Did you build a linear or a non-linear structure, and what's the artistic reason?
**ME:** Through the plot and a careful fit of form to content. I did not lean on straight chronology; I tried for a different, interwoven temporal structure, moving from Al-Tahami's moment in the early nineteenth century to the narrator Tawfiq's in the early 1980s. A living, dynamic form that holds attention. This layering of time answered a layering of narrators, which forced me to invent artistic patterns keeping step with the complicated pace of a life that is never simple or single. I was conscious of that challenge, and afraid of it.

**BB:** What sort of events do you use to mark those transformations, the grand ones or the everyday?
**ME:** Both, each serving the shifts in its own way. The novel swung between the macro and the micro, the universal and the particular, in events and in ideas alike. Between great events, tragedy, drought, epidemic, war, mass displacement, the sheer weight of existence, and the toll life takes on the soul in its finest fractures: alienation, fragmentation, vulnerability.

**BB:** Ricoeur separates lived time, narrative time, and cosmic time. Which of those governs your novel, and how do they braid together?
**ME:** In much of what I write I am preoccupied with time and its weight on a person. What frames the work is something I would call existential time, the time that bears down on a human being powerless before it, time like the sword of Damocles, marking the fragility of life and threatening every security. Against that predicament, the value of narrative, as Ricoeur suggests, lies in giving meaning to existence by ordering the chaos of being inside a text.

**BB:** And the great hinge-moments, colonialism, independence, economic upheaval: how do you deploy them without the novel turning into a cold panorama?
**ME:** The wager is that in deploying those changes the novel summons a time other than the time of historical events, the narrative time, the time of discourse. When the wager is artistic rather than cold documentary, when history is only a means and never the end, the novel itself becomes the goal of the telling.

**BB:** The density of detail is one of the first things a reader notices. Is that an aesthetic choice, or a wish to hold memory against disappearance?
**ME:** Detail breaks the world into small pieces, describing characters, spaces, objects, states, and that is what makes a narrative convincing and tangible. It calls on all the senses. Behind

detail lies alert attention, the capacity to observe and reflect and work with awareness. In that light, detail becomes an aesthetic means of guarding memory against everything that threatens it with erasure, everything that strips a person of his humanity.

**BB:** Barthes ties the reality effect to certain details, the ones that give a text the illusion of actual presence. Do you read your own detail that way?
**ME:** Here I'd separate two things. The presence of reality through its material objects is one thing; the presence of characters as human subjects with complex inner lives is another. In both cases the novel has to create the illusion of the real, has to dissolve the distance between writer and reader, immerse the reader, make the awareness that this is only an imagined story fall away. Barthes is right that the detail works as a marker of the real, but the novelist's engagement with it is not merely rhetorical. It is also an ethical act, a resistance to the erasure of the particular.

**BB:** Does the function of detail change between an ordinary day and a pivotal historical scene?
**ME:** The difference is in content and intention. For an ordinary day the aim is to render a small unit of time by breaking the narrative down from within, into its close, pulsing pieces. For a historical scene the description opens wider, drawing if it must on cinematic technique, on visual capture and spectacle, but without slipping into prescriptiveness.

**BB:** How do you find the right register for a book that reaches into the past without collapsing into easy nostalgia?
**ME:** Writing in a register that evokes the past has to be governed by a clear vision. Evoking the past need not come coupled with longing for it or a wish to return. The question is always the purpose of the evocation. Gratuitous nostalgia, empty sentiment, has no place in serious narrative. Summoning the past in a nostalgic register has to be framed by a literary and philosophical background rooted in existence, not in raw lament. The evocation should work as a reflection on life as time wears it down, on the impermanence and uncertainty that mark the human condition.

**BB:** Who are you writing for, primarily, the reader who knows Tetouan or the one meeting it for the first time? And is there a gap in reception between the local reader and the wider Arab one?
**ME:** For the reader in general, the one who knows the city and the one who does not. We would not have known Cairo had Mahfouz not carried us into its worlds, nor Lisbon without Pessoa, nor St. Petersburg without Dostoevsky, nor Prague without Kafka, nor Barcelona without Zafón. The novel holds a shared human element that makes us love cities and grow attached to them. The universality of a text lies, in the end, in its locality and its particularity.

**BB:** How do you handle the pull between classical Arabic and the colloquial, the space in between, in dialogue and in narration?
**ME:** I write in what Abd Al-Rahman Munif called a median language. I write with the spirit of the character, the worker, the farmer, the young man, the woman in love, the mystic, but not necessarily in their daily speech. I embody the spirit of the character's language rather than the mark of their schooling or class. I may keep some local colloquial words when I find no equivalent in classical Arabic, words carrying a cultural charge that resists translation. The novel conveys the spirit of its characters; it does not simply talk in their dialect.

**BB:** Does the Andalusian heritage, as language, voice, memory, run through the fabric of the book? And how do you keep it from turning into archaeological ornament?
**ME:** The Andalusian-Morisco heritage is a fundamental part of Tetouan and of its people's character, so its presence in the novel is natural, logical, real. It is not called in arbitrarily to furnish the book; it is fused into it. The architecture of the whole old medina reflects it. And what the detail offers, the houses, bathhouses, streets, customs, crafts, cooking, dress, song, sweets, the social gatherings, all of it is a living means to anchor that heritage aesthetically, as an act of self-confidence, a way of holding a civilizational and psychological balance against dissolution and standardization.

**BB:** Tetouan lay under Spanish Protectorate. How does that colonial experience surface in the novel, and how does it press on the characters' sense of themselves?
**ME:** The colonial experience is a moment of psychological and civilizational clash, and not only under the Protectorate. There was also the War of Tetouan in 1860, after which Spanish troops stayed in the city two years. That is the event the novel takes up in its social dimension, thousands of the city's people leaving their homes toward the unknown in a dramatic scene. It resembles Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, a local community suddenly facing the modern, organized machinery of a foreign military power.

**BB:** Do you think Moroccan literature written in Arabic carries a particular charge, reframing the colonial narrative in the language of the self?
**ME:** Against Western ideologies of a colonial, unjust, arrogant cast, ones that tried to press their own image onto reality and history, the Moroccan writer's task is to preserve the self's narrative in the self's own language and spirit, exposing the aims and the flaws of those ideologies. And not only that. Against global cultural upheaval, the policies of capitalist globalization, the digital revolution, the local writer carries a mission of literary, epistemic, and artistic resistance, to keep the cultural self from every attempt at distortion and erasure.

**BB:** And the European characters themselves, do you treat them as an embodied "other," or as a passing presence in the social space?
**ME:** They enter the novel in several ways. Most prominently through a group of Italian archaeology students and their professors who came to Morocco in the early 1990s, and their friendships with Tawfiq and his circle in Martil and Tetouan. Less prominently through some Spanish settlers in the 1920s. And very briefly through the European community in Tangier and an early meeting with an English doctor around 1840. Probably the most significant European presence, narratively, is Tawfiq's relationship, as a university student, with the Italian woman Umberta, rendered through dialogue and a few erotic scenes.

**BB:** What did you build the historical background from, documents, oral testimony, family archives, some mix of them?
**ME:** Throughout the preparation and the writing I kept going back to check historical information and its background. I read what I could reach, in print or online, from history and social-history books. I recall works by Mohamed Daoud, Hasna Daoud, Abd Al-Aziz Al-Saoud, Azzou Hakim, Al-Nasiri, Pedro de Alarcón, and Charles Jarety, among many others. I also listened to elderly people who had lived through the Protectorate, and studied photographs and documents from the period.

**BB:** Was that archival work woven through the writing, or did it stand apart as a preparatory phase before you began?
**ME:** It ran alongside every stage, from preparation and research to revision, and through the moment of writing itself, whenever the need came up.

**BB:** Tetouan stays less present in modern Arabic literature than Fez or Marrakech. Do you read your novel as filling that absence? And can a novel's documentation actually shift a city's collective consciousness?
**ME:** I remember walking the city's streets with a friend, through the Sidi Talha neighborhood, and coming on two young men outside a small bookshop talking about Mohamed Anqar's novel *Barrio Malaga* with real excitement, recognizing their own neighborhood and history in it. Something similar happened with Al-Bashir Al-Damon's *The Bed of Secrets*, which the city talked about for a long time and which was later made into a film. As for *Diwan Al-Ahali*, I was told that people in the Sania Al-Raml neighborhood, where I come from, bought it and passed it around among themselves. I think people look in novels for something that resembles them, that speaks of their past, their city, a love they cannot quite name. That is where the novelist comes in, embodying their intuitions, standing with their longings.

**BB:** How was the book received, inside Tetouan and beyond it?
**ME:** Beyond Tetouan I have only scraps, apart from hearing that the novel reached places I had not expected, Bahrain, Canada, Sweden. Within the city it was celebrated at a symposium organized by *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* and the LLCIS Research Laboratory at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, held at the Iklil Cultural Centre, with an audience of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral students alongside intellectuals and cultural figures. A second gathering followed in Al-Mdiq, run by the Cultural Action Association at the Cultural House. A third came from the Union of Northern Writers, part of the first Moroccan-Spanish Book Day, which brought me together with the novelist Fadila Al-Wazzani, moderated by Dr. Mazzwar Al-Idrissi.

**BB:** Has any critical reading changed how you see the work, or contested the way you rendered a particular character or period?
**ME:** Up to the time of this conversation the novel has not had a published critical study that would move me to reconsider it, and I have met no objection to the way any character or period is represented.

**BB:** What can the novel not say, for all its breadth? Where do its limits fall against historical study, anthropology, autobiography?
**ME:** If we take reality and history as one great, infinite text, then the novel, however wide, cannot contain the world or say everything about it. Historical study and anthropology belong to the human sciences, with their objective method. Autobiography centers on the self, bounded by the writer's own life. The novel is a broader fictional and aesthetic practice, freer to hold and to exceed all of them, a vessel that takes in everyone to voice its own vision of the world, and yet it stays smaller than the greatest text of all, which is life itself.

**BB:** Where are you going creatively after this?
**ME:** I am finishing a second novel, one that moves to a different historical period, different atmospheres, different contexts.

**BB:** Last question. When a reader closes the book and sets it aside, what do you want left in their hands, a feeling, a question, an image?
**ME:** Something of meaning, against the meaninglessness that is everywhere.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# What We Forget, Tales Remember: An Interview with Tahir Shah on Moroccan Storytelling

**Inass Essrhir**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.11171

**Inass Essrhir** is a doctoral researcher and adjunct professor at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco. She holds a B.A. in Cultural Studies from Mohammed V University in Rabat and an M.A. in English Literature and the History of Ideas from Abdelmalek Essaadi University. Her doctoral dissertation examines the role of translation as a means of preserving oral tradition in Paul Bowles's translations of Moroccan storytelling. Her research interests include postcolonial translation studies, oral tradition, migration and diaspora studies, and feminism. She has also held Fulbright and Lois Roth Foundation grants at the University of Delaware, the University of Texas, and Columbia University.

inass.essrhir@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3413-8402

Received: 24-12-2025 Accepted: 25-03-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# What We Forget, Tales Remember: An Interview with Tahir Shah on Moroccan Storytelling

**Inass Essrhir**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

## ABSTRACT

This interview presents Tahir Shah's perspective on the intersection of Moroccan storytelling with written tradition, translation, and cultural preservation. For Shah, stories function as essential sustenance for human civilization, not mere entertainment. Central to his view is the belief that translation does not reproduce stories. Rather, it creates new variants that keep them alive as they move across languages and cultures. This interview also draws upon Shah's encounter with Moroccan storyteller Mohammed Mrabet, offering a window into the literary collaboration between Mrabet and American writer Paul Bowles. Through this project, Shah questions conventional assumptions about authorship and ownership, noting that oral stories must remain free to circulate beyond the page. He further contends that understanding Moroccan narratives requires years of immersion in language, place, and cultural context—a depth that written tradition alone cannot fully capture. The interview concludes with Shah's assertion that every person is a potential storyteller, celebrating the power of tales as cultural inheritance.

## KEYWORDS

**Moroccan Storytelling**

**Tahir Shah**

**Orality**

**Translation**

**Preservation**

*This interview was conducted in English.*

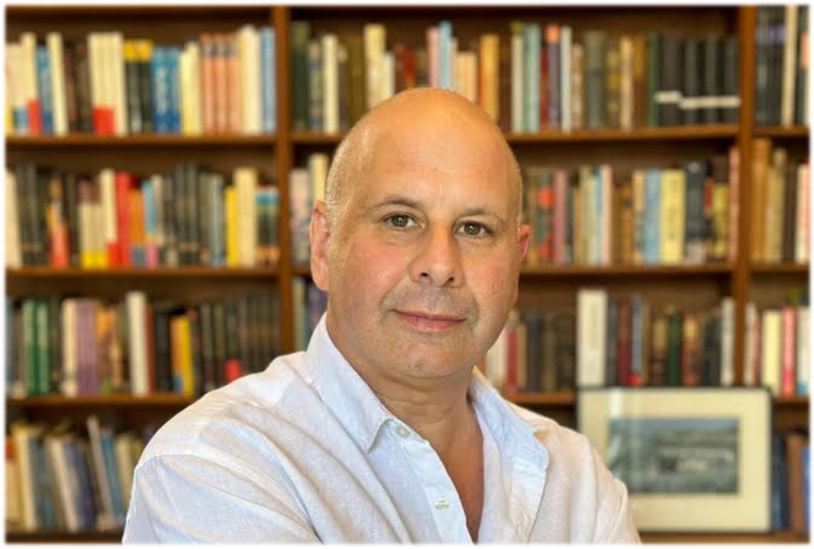
## Introduction

At the crossroads of storytelling, cultural memory, and literary transmission stands the remarkable figure of Tahir Shah. Born in London to a prominent Anglo-Afghan family, Shah was profoundly shaped by his father, the renowned thinker and Sufi teacher Idries Shah. Heir to this rich intellectual legacy, Shah has grown into a prolific writer, journalist, and documentary filmmaker. Over three decades, he has produced more than forty works comprising memoirs, travel literature, and fiction. Some examples include accounts of real-life adventures in Morocco, travel narratives of the legendary King Solomon's mines, as well as fiction tracing Eastern mythology and magical realism. Across this extensive collection, Shah has committed himself to revealing what lies beneath the apparent surface of a place, most compellingly, perhaps, in Morocco.

Shah's close bond with Morocco began in childhood during family visits that left a lasting impact. This connection deepened over the years, evolving from seasonal travel into permanent residency, when Shah relocated his family to Casablanca in 2003. This experience found expression in his travel memoir *The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca* (2006), which follows the family's acquisition of a ruined palatial mansion in a Casablanca shantytown and their struggle against corrupt bureaucracy and malevolent house spirits. This adventure

Contact ✉ inass.essrhir@etu.uae.ac.ma
©2026

continues in the sequel *In Arabian Nights: A Caravan of Moroccan Dreams* (2008), which chronicles Shah's journey across Morocco's deserts and *medinas*[1] in pursuit of traditional folktales. For Shah, life in Morocco evokes "the make-believe world of *A Thousand and One Nights*" (*In Arabian Nights* 9). Beyond mere nostalgia, this description suggests that the landscape itself is woven into the fabric of oral tradition. This demonstrates that tales preserve what human memory may cast aside.



It is through these riveting works that I first encountered Shah's writing. In August 2025, I had the privilege of approaching him to request an interview, which was subsequently conducted via email. Remarkably, our exchange revealed a writer whose generosity and openness were themselves a kind of gift. Hence, what this interview may lack in length, it more than compensates for in depth, providing a window into a mind that has spent decades listening to what Moroccan folktales are trying to say.

## The Interview

**Inass Essrhir:** What do you think maintains the uniqueness of Moroccan tales even when they traverse diverse cultures and connect with different storytelling traditions?
**Tahir Shah:** Morocco is a crossroads geographically, and a crossroads of culture, too. The stories and tales that are woven into the fabric of society in the kingdom are unusual in that they come from all points of the compass, and as such they provide an identity not found in other regions. Morocco is crafted from its stories through a kind of magical alchemy.

**IE:** In *In Arabian Nights*, you refer to your meeting with Mohammed Mrabet. What drew your attention to him as a storyteller? How was your encounter?
**TS:** Mrabet is so incredibly special and important because he walks a line between fact and fantasy. It's useful to remember that throughout human history this is how stories were told and passed on: by drawing the listener in through beginning with realities, and then widening it out into a zone that was fantastical—and that's very much the style of Mohammed Mrabet.

**IE:** When you asked Mrabet about stories, he replied: "in the Rif, stories are the blood that runs through our veins, . . . they are the air we breathe, the food we eat" (*In Arabian Nights* 62). This metaphor makes me think that storytelling, like food and air, functions as an indispensable element of Mrabet's life. It also implies that his narratives draw upon several sociocultural threads. Can we thus say that Mrabet's tales reveal how storytelling is inherently polyphonic and intertextual?
**TS:** The kind of tales told and retold in Morocco are (in my opinion) a form of sustenance as needed and as vital to humanity as food or water. They challenge the way we think, interpret,

question and, most important of all, the way we perceive the world around us. A society that does not tell stories is void and empty, desiccated like a desert. But, fortunately, it's also a rarity. Indeed, I can't remember ever encountering a place where stories are not told, because they are so requisite to human civilization.

**IE:** At one point, you told Dr. Mehdi that Mrabet advised you "to close [your] eyes and then wake up" if you want to find the story in your heart (*In Arabian Nights* 167). What did this advice mean to you personally? Do you believe preserving the method of accessing authentic stories is as important as preserving the stories themselves?
**TS:** The Sufi master Jalaluddin Rumi said famously, "[m]an is asleep, must he die before he wakes up?"[2] I often turn this phrase of Rumi's around in my mind. It's central to understanding our condition, and to grasping the journey facing us all.

**IE:** As you know, Paul Bowles recorded and translated tales by Moroccan storytellers like Mrabet. How do you perceive the experience of having oral stories recorded, translated, and published?
**TS:** Stories need to be captured and kept in libraries and in all kinds of ways. But the key thing is that they must be "re-wilded" into society. There is no point at all in keeping stories in a box as it were, left to wither and die. In order to thrive, stories—like anything in the natural world—need to be free. They need to be thrown into the wind.

**IE:** How would you describe the role of this translation project in relation to the preservation of Moroccan oral storytelling?
**TS:** One of the most intriguing aspects of folklore is how stories are tethered to a place in which they are told, and tethered to the language in which they are spoken. Stories and language go hand in hand, which is no surprise, of course. Translating a story actually creates not a clone in another tongue, but an entirely fresh variant . . . and that is very much where the magic takes place.

**IE:** What is your view of the relationship between Bowles and Mrabet within this literary collaboration?
**TS:** I actually have quite strong opinions on Bowles and Mrabet, and would say that they both needed one another. But I would say that Bowles needed Mrabet more than Mrabet needed Bowles.

**IE:** In *In Arabian Nights*, I noticed that you dedicate an entire glossary to explaining Moroccan vocabulary and expressions in the text. To what extent does this aspect impact the reader's understanding? I'm asking because the stories that Bowles translated, such as *Love with a Few Hairs* (1967), contain Moroccan Arabic words without italics or explanation, even when English translations do exist. What do you think this aspect suggests?
**TS:** Attempting to shine light on aspects of culture that are so innate to a place like Morocco is never easy . . . and it's something which is bound to only be comprehended by those outside the society in an elemental or basic way. To understand Morocco, and the tales told here, you have to spend decades immersing yourself in the subtleties of society, and the mindset . . . and the more time you spend here, the more you realize how little you actually comprehend. When you get to that point, I would say you are on the path to making real progress.

**IE:** The published stories from Bowles's collaboration with Moroccan storytellers are also marked by the omission of quotation marks in dialogues, which blurs the line between direct and reported speech. What might this say about transitioning from oral to written form?
**TS:** Written storytelling is such a new and unimportant version of what has always been oral—and in my opinion, (and I admit this as a writer), the written word is terribly weak when compared to oral storytelling. When spoken, stories are fluid, dynamic, evolving . . . and they are not set in stone. I find it totally unimportant whether there is certain dialogue architecture or spelling. Stories are free, and should in the first instance be spoken, so that they are passed from a mouth to an ear, rather than absorbed by the eyes.

**IE:** This collaboration raises questions about authorship itself. When published stories emerge from the dynamic connection between oral storyteller and translator, rather than individual creative expression, how do you understand the concept of the author? Does collaborative cross-cultural transmission challenge traditional notions of singular literary ownership?
**TS:** Stories belong to all people, in all places and at all times. They cannot be owned. They cannot be copyrighted. This is an Occidental construct and one that bores me—the fact that people want to own . . . just as our ancestors on the savannah of Africa would have not comprehended the ownership of the grassland beneath one's feet. I wish people would stop trying to lay claim to ownership, and start trying to learn from what they hold in their hands instead.

**IE:** In your latest work *Amazigh Folk Tales* (2025), you collected tales from oral sources. How was the experience of undertaking this endeavor?
**TS:** There's nothing more important to me than collecting stories from oral sources because it depends on so much—on the person telling the tale, on their mood, on their ability to tell a tale, on how well they slept the night before, on their dreams and their stresses as well. Oral telling is profound. It is immediate. It is a connection with the most ancient threads of humanity that bind us to the lifeblood of our ancestors. Meanwhile, writing is an incredibly young and challenged construct, that offers no more than about ten percent of a story's true bandwidth.

**IE:** You have drawn so much from the Amazigh oral tradition, a culture that emphasizes modesty, selflessness, and moral clarity based on tales like "The Journey to the Singing Tree." When editing this collection, how did you balance the task of making its living essence accessible to international audiences while preserving their cultural core?
**TS:** In editing that small book, I tried to show how the most powerful tales don't need to be on an epic scale. They don't need flying carpets and vast treasures, or genies and magic. Rather, they can be crafted from an expression of simplicity, which reflects something far deeper.

**IE:** After a genuinely immersive journey exploring folk storytelling in Morocco, can oral storytelling be legitimately called "oral literature," or does literature only apply to written texts?
**TS:** The West loves to give names to things and to waste immense amounts of time discussing something—like whether literature has to be written—when they could actually be drawing wisdom from the material they are holding. It is like someone marooned on a desert island finding a coconut in the sand and spending all their time considering whether it is a nut or a seed . . . doing so will pass the time, but it won't draw sustenance from the coconut that could save the person's life.

**IE:** What would you say to young Moroccans, or young storytellers anywhere, about the value of keeping their oral traditions alive?
**TS:** I would say: be proud of what you have in your grasp. Spend time cherishing it, loving it, learning from it, and passing it on from one generation to the next. Celebrate the stories in your families, and in your homes, and remember that they are a reflection of the people who came before you . . . a valued part of culture like none other. But, most importantly, they are much more than a mere entertainment. They are a lifeblood.

**IE:** If you could choose, would you rather see Moroccan storytelling remain a secret for Moroccans alone, or does it have a role on the world stage, even if that means going through different processes, such as translation and editing?
**TS:** Stories change when they are edited and translated. They become something else. It's a case of "Chinese Whispers" . . . and that's the beauty of stories and tales. They are always changing their shape, changing their form. Anyone who knows the work I have published will know my father's favorite story, "The Tale of the Sands," in which a stream needs to change its form in order to cross the desert. Stories do that. They change their form. And that's ultimately the most crucial strength they contain.

**IE:** In light of what we have discussed, from Bowles conveying Mrabet's voice to your own journey with Moroccan folktales, I am curious: Does the translator of stories, in a sense, become a storyteller, too?
**TS:** We are all storytellers. If you don't believe me, record everything you say or write for a week—every single word—and then review it later. You will find yourself phrasing material in story or anecdote form more than you realize, because it's the best way to pass on ideas and information.

**IE:** Thank you very much for your generous time and profound answers.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# *The Last Rekkas: Chronicles of a Foot Courier in Southern Morocco*, by Aomar Boum and Majdouline Boum-Mendoza. Langages du Sud, 2024. 163 pp. ISBN: 978-9920-560-50-4.

**Abdellatif Labkadri**
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, FLSH Sais-Fes, Morocco
AMRLDCCS Research Lab

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.8958

**Abdellatif Labkadri** is a PhD student at the Afro-Mediterranean Research Lab for Discourse, Communication, and Cultural Studies at the University of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, FLSH, Sais-Fes, Morocco. His research interests include postcolonial literature with a focus on Moroccan historical fiction.

Abdellatif.labkadri@usmba.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4734-522X

Received: 19-12-2025 Accepted: 27-03-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

## Book Review

# *The Last Rekkas: Chronicles of a Foot Courier in Southern Morocco*, by Aomar Boum and Majdouline Boum-Mendoza. Langages du Sud, 2024. 163 pp. ISBN: 978-9920-560-50-4.

**Abdellatif Labkadri**
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, FLSH Sais-Fes, Morocco
AMRLDCCS Research Lab

During the postcolonial era, memory and history have played a pivotal role, especially in the academic scholarship produced in the Global South. The intricate relationship between reconstructing history and delving into the collective memory of communities has been a subject of scholarly debate among culturalists, anthropologists, and historians. Framed by the premise that victors write history, the postcolonial trend in historiography is bent on reconsidering collective or individual narratives overlooked by established history. History writing often remains dominated by power dynamics in the Foucauldian sense. Power holders dictate terms and narratives that serve their interests and often neglect those with less power. This systematic exclusion of undesirable groups remains the key factor behind the rise of subaltern studies, which is considered instrumental in the process of rewriting history. In this vein, Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has become a functional theoretical framework, granting voice to those who have been forcefully silenced throughout the (post)colonial era due to a lack of agency, and even during the independence era by their fellow citizens.

In light of this theoretical framing, *The Last Rekkas* by Aomar Boum, with the contribution of his teenage daughter Majdouline, delves into the forgotten memories of his father, Faraji Boum, so as to subvert the imposed historical narratives, memory abuses, and silencing of marginal voices. *The Last Rekkas* fills a critical gap in the scholarship by revisiting the memory of a neglected group of people, the Haratin, who hail from enslaved ancestors and reside in the remote village of Lamhamid in the Anti-Atlas region (50). Boum argues that "historians lack records of the social histories of communities throughout the Anti-Atlas" (12). Hence, *The Last Rekkas*, or the forgotten courier, provides insights into an unexplored realm of research that epitomizes people on the margins: forced laborers whose suffering and contributions have often been neglected not only by Eurocentric historians but also by nationalist ones.

Inspired by Mohammed al-Mokhtar Soussi (1900–1963), a Moroccan scholar, historian, and politician who argues in *Min Afwāh Al-Rijāl* [*From the Mouths of Men*] that historians need to devote part of their work to recording their socio-cultural background (4), Aomar Boum records his father's testimonies on the history of the Moroccan southeast. Professor Boum, the holder of the Maurice Amado Endowed Chair in Sephardic Studies at the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles, introduces *The Last Rekkas* as an indigenous multimodal ethnographic counter-narrative, which incorporates written texts, images, and visual drawings. Since 1995, the author has been collecting data through long hours of interviewing his father, Faraji, published in this account in 2024, shortly after Faraji's demise. The central argument of

Contact ✉ Abdellatif.labkadri@usmba.ac.ma
©2026

this account resides in its centralization of the marginalized micro-history of an individual, epitomizing the entire history of the Global South.

Across twenty-four chapters, *The Last Rekkas* traces the genealogy of a forced labor Across twenty-four chapters, *The Last Rekkas* traces the genealogy of a forced labor messenger's life journey in the remote Sahara, located in the South of Morocco. The prevailing themes of this account are encapsulated in three major topics: colonial history, survival in the harsh environment, and ethnic diversity. Faraji Boum represents a premodern postman and a firsthand eyewitness who suffered from the coerced corvée labor—unpaid work imposed by colonial power and local tribal chiefs, as the author delineates in his account (2). He was appointed as a Rekkas—a traditional foot courier who had to trek almost 60 km per day (15), crossing the untamed wild landscape, where he sometimes had to endure food scarcity and the menaces of wild creatures. When Faraji was not on duty as a foot messenger, he farmed palm trees or managed the water distribution system at a negligible cost for his fellow villagers in the Foum Zguid oasis. This historical personal memoir tracks not only the struggles of Faraji but also the transformation of the village due to the encounter with the French colonizer, as the fifteenth chapter, "From Trail to Road," delineates. This transition, as Faraji depicts it, also touches on the ethno-cultural fabric of the region when French settlers proposed building a church or, as Faraji humorously called it, "a mosque for the Christians" (64). However, this religious proposal was rejected by the indigenous affairs bureau for fear of stirring up the indigenous people, who consisted of Muslims and Jews.

A notable shortcoming of this account resides in the fact that Boum leaves readers perplexed and unsure about the genre of *The Last Rekkas*, which blends diverse subgenres. It contains several aspects of writing that problematize its literary category. Put differently, the inclusion of visuals and drawings presents the book as an illustrative story. Still, the wealth of anthropological and historical data introduces it as a historical memoir. But the author's narration about his frequent visits, accompanied by his daughter and wife, to the South turns the book into a travelogue that incorporates the traveler's personal reflections on cultural practices and descriptions of landscapes. The writer cultivates a multi-layered methodological paradigm that synthesizes in one narrative all the aforementioned stylistic features—micro-history, anthropology, visuals, and biography.

The intergenerational and trilingual form of *The Last Rekkas* constitutes two other intriguing and distinctive stylistic characteristics. The book is a collaboration among three generations: the grandfather, Faraji Boum; the father, Aomar Boum; and his daughter, Majdouline Boum-Mendoza. Each offers a part to make *The Last Rekkas*: the personal archive and memories of Faraji, the anthropological and academic skills of Aomar, and Majdouline's illustrations. The entanglement of three generations' efforts shapes this book's intergenerational authorship, foregrounding both the continuity and the polyphony of this narrative. Moreover, publishing *The Last Rekkas* in three languages (Arabic, French, and English) fosters an intercultural and translingual dialogue that not only signals the author's intentionality in reaching a wide audience but also destabilizes monolingual readings, opening the door to comparative textual analysis of the translated editions.

As Gérard Genette argues in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, books' titles function as an instrumental device, bridging the gap between the reading materials and their readers (xviii). In this sense, reflecting critically on the title of Boum's narrative, *The Last Rekkas* conveys multilayered connotations. To elaborate on this point further, the title alludes to dystopia or elegy, mourning the demise of a subaltern figure—Faraji—who is subjected to an unjust life journey, imbued with suffering and oppression. It epitomizes the voiceless groups hailing from the Global South and those neglected forced laborers whom the machinery of the

French colonizer coerced into constructing the grand narrative of the Western "mission civilisatrice."

It is worth noting that *The Last Rekkas* aligns with Charles de Foucauld's account *Reconnaissance au Maroc* (1888), which incorporates the author's geographical, ethnographical, and cultural observations from his expedition to Morocco in the late nineteenth century. However, Boum's account differs from de Foucauld's in its intentionality. In other words, Aomar Boum and Majdouline Boum-Mendoza (a son and a granddaughter of Faraji) embark on an intellectual project to unravel the past, centralizing the margins. By contrast, de Foucauld's work, which is accused of being Eurocentric, represents an Orientalist perspective and reproduces epistemic violence—in the Spivakian sense—of colonial discourse, disclosing the entanglement of scholarly inquisitiveness with imperial ambitions and paving the way for conquest. Given that, the significance of *The Last Rekkas* stems from its counter-narrativity against such monolithic accounts, among which is de Foucauld's. Boum's narrative embodies the subalterns who can speak their minds and articulate their suffering.

In sum, *The Last Rekkas* achieves its primary objective: to be an eye-opening story that delves into the forgotten memories and history of Morocco. Boum's account constitutes an intellectual contribution to Moroccan postcolonial cultural studies that probes the buried memory of decentralized communities in the South of Morocco. Other works by Moroccan authors worth noting are Brahim El Guabli's *Desert Imaginations* (2025), which focuses on abundant Saharan historical scholarship and cultural practices; and Chouki El Hamel's *Black Morocco* (2013), which traces the history of enslavement in Morocco since the seventeenth century under Sultan Moulay Ismail, who created an army from slaves. Similarly, *The Last Rekkas* attempts to democratize history by providing a voice to Faraji Boum, whose life-journey narrative transcends being the story of an individual to become an archetype of a socio-cultural group to which historians turn a blind eye. This account requires a significant degree of engagement, inviting readers to question the official established historical archive, constructed by either nationalist or foreign historians. The audience of *The Last Rekkas* extends beyond domestic scholarship to anyone invested in counter-narratives, decolonial discourse, and the politics of memory in postcolonial Morocco, especially the Southeast region. The significance of this account resides in its insights into epistemic resistance that conventional colonial historiography obscures.

## Works Cited

El Guabli, Brahim. *Desert Imaginations: A History of Saharanism and Its Radical Consequences*. U of California P, 2025.

El Hamel, Chouki. *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam*. Cambridge UP, 2013.

Foucauld, Charles de. *Reconnaissance au Maroc (1883–1884)*. Editions L'Harmattan, 1998.

Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge UP, 1997.

Soussi, Mohammed al-Mokhtar. *Min Afwāh Al-Rijāl* [*From the Mouths of Men*]. Dar Al Amane, 2015.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# *Le Trône des Illusions* (*The Throne of Illusions*), by Étienne Fakaba Sissoko. 1st ed. L'Harmattan, 2025. 235 pp., ISBN: 978-2-336-53008-6.

**Niapégué Sanou**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.9106

**Niapégué Sanou** is a Malian doctoral researcher at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tetouan. He holds a bachelor's degree in English Studies and a master's degree in Interpreting and Translation Studies from the same university. His academic research focuses on postcolonial studies, African literature, Malian literature, and translation.

niapegue.sanou1@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0307-8098

Received: 25-12-2025 Accepted: 07-03-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Book Review

## *Le Trône des Illusions* (*The Throne of Illusions*), by Étienne Fakaba Sissoko. 1st ed. L'Harmattan, 2025. 235 pp., ISBN: 978-2-336-53008-6.

**Niapégué Sanou**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, some writers and intellectuals turn to literature to expose what others, under self-censorship, overlook. This is a form of resistance literature, also known as committed literature (*littérature engagée*). It is a tradition where the writer functions not merely as an observer who writes for pleasure but as a catalyst for social transformation. In Mali, one such committed writer is Étienne Fakaba Sissoko. Sissoko is best known as a researcher and nonfiction author. He has published more than twenty books and several academic articles. Recently, however, because of his country's burning issues, he has embraced fiction to reveal what nonfiction dares not tackle. Literature thus became a strategic choice for Sissoko after he discovered the limits of nonfiction. His debut novel, *Le Trône des Illusions* (*The Throne of Illusions*), represents a conversion of academic writing into creative writing. It aims to express lived political reality in West Africa. This stance led him to jail and then to exile, much like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. As an economist and university professor, Sissoko brings an insider's gaze to the mechanics of state failure amid the resurgence of coups in West Africa. *Le Trône des Illusions* functions as a "mirror of the real" (14). It uses satire to diagnose systemic rot within modern African governance. The novel also provides an autopsy of dead democracies in a region that has become the epicenter of recent military coups in Africa.

The novel portrays the burning issues of a fictional republic named the "Republic of Gayma," a nation blessed with vast resources—gold, uranium, oil, and fertile land—yet cursed by decades of bad governance. Gayma serves as a microcosm for African states where the dream of independence has devolved into a cyclical "eternal return" of military coups (21). The story centers on the ideological collision between two foils. The antagonist is General Makossa Sini, a self-proclaimed "savior" of the nation. His name in Bambara ironically means "perishing tomorrow." The protagonist is Sabu, a university professor whose name means "cause," deriving from the Arabic word "sabab." Through writing, Sabu believes he can be the cause of change in the Republic of Gayma, while convinced that Sini will perish tomorrow because of his tyranny and bad governance. Unlike traditional hero narratives, Sabu's resistance is rooted in the "noble tradition of the pen" (13). His main occupation, in addition to teaching at the University of Gayma, is writing for the clandestine journal, *Kulékan*, which means "squeal" in Bambara. *Kulékan* becomes a platform for voicing the unspoken truth, the squeal of a suffering and agonizing nation.

The story begins with Sini's "cold precision" in seizing power under the guise of "the savior of the nation" (26). The narrative then meticulously follows Sabu's descent from intellectual critic to political prisoner after he refuses a strategic offer to become Sini's prime minister—a move intended to buy his silence. By refusing this offer, Sabu, as a committed writer, sides with "the robbed" against "the robbers" as advocated by Ngũgĩ in *Writers in Politics* (1981). Rather

Contact ✉ niapegue.sanou1@etu.uae.ac.ma
©2026

than betraying the resistance, he prefers going through dehumanizing routines in the Zandjara prison. This prison is a site of profound psychological and physical torture. While Sabu is isolated there in the "Woefolo" (the first woe, in Bambara), a cell also called "la fosse des brisés" (the pit of the broken) (87), the narrative shifts to Merlin Makarty. Makarty is one of the architects of the regime, the "King of Illusions" (49). He orchestrates digital propaganda to turn lies into truth and "manufacture consent"—a practice explained by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent* (1988). The tension peaks as an underground resistance movement, founded by Sabu and called the "Great Convergence," prepares its final assault to topple Sini. Sabu first leverages his public trial as a tribune to awaken Gayma's collective consciousness (176).

As already hinted above, *Le Trône des Illusions* is theoretically grounded in the discourse of committed literature or combat and resistance literature as defined by pioneers, such as Leo Tolstoy in *What Is Art?* (1898), Jean-Paul Sartre in *What Is Literature?* (1948), Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Writers in Politics* (1981). The novel also illustrates the role of the intellectual as defined by Edward Said in his 1994 book *Representations of the Intellectual*.

Through Sabu the protagonist, Sissoko employs Sartre's concept of words as "loaded pistols" and writing about current issues as "firing" and "action by disclosure" (Sartre 23-24). Sabu presents *Kulékan*, the clandestine journal, as an ammunition belt: "every word we convey is a bullet against the regime, but a well-aimed bullet must be carefully prepared" (38). Likewise, naming the reality in Gayma becomes a heavy blow against propaganda, stripping that reality of its "innocence." This makes the reader unable to ignore it once it is revealed. In *Le Trône des Illusions*, Sissoko exposes the bitter reality: the unprecedented surge of insecurity, the collapse of healthcare, the apocalypse of education, and the energy crisis. The people are left with only "three hours of electricity a day" (35). This situation contrasts sharply with the opulent, royal lifestyle of Sini and those who benefit from his regime. Sissoko also explores surveillance through the character of Makarty. By employing an "army of bloggers" and "videographers" among influencers to flood social media with patriotic hashtags and slogans, the regime weaponizes the digital gaze, labeling dissidents as bad citizens and "traitors" (57). This creates a culture of monitoring that serves as a modern tool for political control.

Commitment has a price: victory, prison, or even assassination. Sabu ends up in prison, yet he refuses to give in. He is also ready for all other scenarios; therefore, being in jail does not break his spirit. By putting him in a cage, the regime cannot jail his ideas. He transforms the prison into a new opportunity for reflection, intellectual productivity, and growth. In Act 4, Sabu describes the prison as a "laboratory of ideas" and resistance (131).

Describing Sabu's detention, Sissoko portrays a generational dialogue. On one side is Bango Diouf, an elder statesman of the "Autorail" generation, who values constant and slow progress (124). On the other side is the "TGV" generation (Generation Z), youth who demand rapid and radical change (123). This dialogue provides a sophisticated critique of the failures of the first waves of democratization witnessed by the "Autorail" generation. It also emphasizes the burning issues of the "TGV" generation, whose uprisings are often hijacked by the military as a shortcut to seize power. This process eventually leads to the death of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa.

Regarding its form, the novel borrows from drama, essay, oral tradition, and religious discourse. The plot unfolds as a classical tragedy in six acts, while the stylistic choices are deeply intertwined with its commitment to African oral traditions. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe writes that in Africa, "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (7). Implementing this tradition, Sissoko punctuates his prose with several African proverbs that

serve as philosophical anchors, such as "The tree that falls makes more noise than the forest that grows" (21, 132). Alongside the African wisdom in proverbs, Sissoko quotes from both the Bible and the Quran. He is aware of the inseparability of religion from politics in sub-Saharan Africa despite constitutional secularism. Both proverbs and verses from sacred books foster the narrator's multifaceted ethos. They highlight commitment not only through a political perspective but also through moral and religious lenses. This approach corroborates Tolstoy's definition of committed art in *What Is Art?* (1898). This hybrid style gives Sissoko more freedom to explore the current issues more deeply, while mirroring the real.

However, despite the novel's political urgency and rhetorical soundness, it overlooks a serious democratization paradox. Sabu's intellectual commitment, while essential for disclosing the regime's failures, ultimately requires a military "trigger" in the form of the dissident Yigo and other military figures to topple Sini. The Great Convergence, the resistance movement he founded, agrees to engage in civil-military collaboration. Yet it advocates democracy and claims to oppose the military's confiscation of power. This reliance on the gun to topple the gun risks fueling a vicious circle. One undesirable system may end up being merely replaced by another that is worse. That would happen if the military dissidents with whom the Great Convergence collaborates decide to betray the movement's ideals and hijack the fruit of the resistance. Furthermore, when it comes to the form of the novel, one may feel that Sissoko's style tends to verge on the didactic. Some readers might find that his dialogues about politics and governance sound too much like a lecture, a lesson, or an expository essay with multiple quotes and African proverbs used as evidence. This leaves little room for the reader's own interpretation.

Nevertheless, these critiques do not diminish the work's importance. Sissoko's choice of this particular style can even be a strength. The intellectual, after all, is someone who can easily articulate "a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public" (Said 11). Tolstoy also confirms this. He claims that any work of art that is intelligible only to a small group while remaining unintelligible to the plain masses and disconnected from societal issues is either "prostituted" art, bad art, or not art at all (Tolstoy 190).

Therefore, *Le Trône des Illusions* remains more than a portrait of a coup. It is an excavation of how African people, in quest of a savior of the nation, may be easily tricked by political opportunists, whether military or civilian. Sissoko provides a model for reading contemporary African literature beyond aesthetics, stressing social diagnosis and political autopsy. His debut is a reminder that while a throne of illusions may crumble, the mirages of salvation offered by opportunistic "saviors" remain a constant threat to true liberation. Through Sabu, Sissoko argues that a nation's freedom will only endure if it is "nourished every day with justice and solidarity" (230). Overall, the novel confirms Étienne Fakaba Sissoko as a vital voice in contemporary African fiction. It demands a criticism as intellectually rigorous as the resistance it depicts. Through this bold debut, the "noble tradition of the pen" finds a powerful new advocate in the struggle for West African dignity (13).

## Notes

- *Le Trône des Illusions* was originally written in French. All translations are the author's own.

## Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. 1958. Anchor Books, 1994.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. 1961. Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Press, 1963.

Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Pantheon, 1988.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Writers in Politics*. Heinemann, 1981.

Said, Edward W. *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. 1994. Vintage Books, 1996.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *What Is Literature?* 1948. Translated by Bernard Frechtman, Philosophical Library, 1949.

Sissoko, Étienne Fakaba. *Le Trône des Illusions*. L'Harmattan, 2025.

Tolstoy, Leo. *What Is Art?* 1898. Translated by Aylmer Maude, Funk & Wagnalls, 1904.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# *Decolonizing Approaches to Users and Audiences in the Global South: Context, Theory, and Method*, edited by Tarik Sabry, Winston Mano, and Andrea Medrado. Routledge, 2026. 350 pp., ISBN 978-1-032-59036-3.

**El Makke Maagoul**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.12304

**El Makke Maagoul** is a doctoral researcher at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, and a member of the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural, and Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab. He obtained his MA degree in "English Literature and History of Ideas" from the same faculty. His research interests include cultural studies, postcolonial literature, and media studies.

elmakke.maagoul@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4856-7589

Received: 20-11-2025 Accepted: 25-04-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Book Review

## *Decolonizing Approaches to Users and Audiences in the Global South: Context, Theory, and Method*, edited by Tarik Sabry, Winston Mano, and Andrea Medrado. Routledge, 2026. 350 pp., ISBN 978-1-032-59036-3.

**El Makke Maagoul**
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

Over the past two decades, decolonial studies has gained prominence in the Global South by interrogating Western epistemologies and developing new tools to shift the geography of knowledge and achieve epistemic justice. Within media and communication studies, new projects have been launched to decolonize audience research using non-Western methods and approaches. *Decolonising Approaches to Users and Audiences in the Global South: Context, Theory and Method* provides a subversive reading of digital audience habitus by foregrounding the "decolonial epistemological turn" in audience research. Edited by Tarik Sabry, Winston Mano, and Andrea Medrado, this volume probes alternative modalities of epistemic emancipation and justice. The book seeks an alternative hermeneutic possibility: shifting the relational totality of meaning-making and changing perceptions about audiences in Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and the Global South at large. Rather than relying on the supposed universality of Western approaches to study audiences in the Global South, the book rethinks audience studies through decolonial lenses. It remaps new fields in contemporary media and communication studies.

This collection provides alternative narratives of how internet users have shifted the traditional balance of power, transitioning from passive consumers to active content producers who gain visibility and influence. The editors reflect on the Latin American *lo popular* approach to media users, which is distinctly differentiated from Western "popular culture," wherein audiences are often viewed as mere consumers of mass culture. New media provides ample opportunities for users to create their own stories, reflect on their lived experiences, and consequently dominate the digital sphere (Rodríguez; Rincón). *Lo popular* represents the dynamic interaction of all modes of expression, such as storytelling, music, telenovelas, and fairs, where meaning is mediated and agency is reclaimed. Rincón's concept of *lo popular* foregrounds a participatory model where meaning is collectively negotiated via the engagement of all members of society.

Democratizing the "digital sphere" in the Global South begins with the question of who controls whom, and in what way. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire's "critical pedagogy" overcomes the paradigm in which knowledge is transmitted from the knowledgeable (teacher/researcher) to the uninitiated (student/researched). Instead, it provides a democratic method of knowledge production through the participation of all "active subjects," which makes the idea of *conscientização*, or "consciousness-raising," possible (Sabry et al. 17-18). Knowledge becomes the byproduct of horizontal interaction among all participants. It involves both feeling and thinking, developing what Orlando Fals Borda calls a *sentipensante* (Fals Borda 9, qtd. in Sabry et al. 17). This process of knowledge production in Freire's

Contact ✉ elmakke.maagoul@etu.uae.ac.ma
©2026

*conscientização* and Fals Borda's *sentipensante* inspires the participatory model of audience research by foregrounding the influence of media users, representing them as active participants rather than passive objects of study.

Within the context of this participatory model, Sabry, Mano, and Medrado observe that African audiences are becoming more "digitally literate, civically engaged," and, drawing on L. Lusike Mukhongo's own 2020 research, more likely to speak truth to power: whereas the old paradigm of "media power" considered audiences passive recipients of content, the participatory turn has shifted media power toward audiences who become active creators (11). Mukhongo's own chapter in the collection turns to more recent examples of this same dynamic, among them Kenyan internet users' use of hashtags such as #SomeoneTellCNN and #RejectFinanceBill2024 to contest global media narratives and mobilise digital activism.

The book is divided into four sections, articulating different ways to decolonize audience research in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The editors' introduction traces the genealogy of audience research in the Global South and maps new modalities of South-South cross-cultural dialogue and emancipation. This is followed by a dialogue between Tarik Sabry and David Morley, where Morley reflects on de-Westernizing media studies using a non-media-centric approach. Utilizing an ethnographic perspective, Morley argues for the potential of audiences in the Global South to subvert Western communication technologies and gain global visibility. Heading the Africa section, Tanja Bosch's chapter argues that the digital lived experience varies across the globe. Traditional audience research methods, she argues, may not always be adequate for "capturing users' unique perspectives and experiences" in the Global South or majority world (Bosch 74).

Mukhongo's chapter in this collection aligns with the decolonial turn in Africa. Digital activism, she argues, provides new ways to challenge what Couldry and Mejias describe as the construction of societies "under total algorithmic control" (qtd. in Mukhongo 94), a hegemony that African digital activists are actively contesting. Despite the inequality of digital infrastructure in Africa, new media users actively participate in dismantling biases, raising awareness of the power of digital activism to change perceptions, and contesting global narratives. Mukhongo coins the term "carcerality and systemic eradication of Indigenous knowledge" for what Western-centric research methodologies have enacted in the Global South (92). From an Afrokological perspective, she argues for the power of indigenous technologies to promote self-representation in media by celebrating local experiences and narratives.

The second part of the collection is devoted to the Asian context. Yu-Kei Tse contextualizes the influence of streaming culture in Japan during the 2010s and 2020s and its impact on television viewing. Tse examines three main Japanese Broadcast Video-on-Demand (BVOD) services, NHK On-Demand (2008-), NHK+ (2020-), and TVer (2015-), to explore how terrestrial channels survived the shift to online viewing. She frames Western industrial and audience practices as too often treated as the "default," against which other contexts are cast merely as "alternatives" (126). In the case of Japan, Tse argues, online TV viewing both maintains social cohesion and expands the popularity of Japanese culture, with anime serving as a prime example.

In the context of China, Xiaoxiao Zhang reflects on viewing practices when television was introduced to Chinese audiences in the 1980s. Zhang states that television provided entertainment to a society suffering economic hardships while simultaneously reinforcing "authoritarian governance" (Zhang 165). The introduction of TV to Chinese homes brought "boundless joy and satisfaction" to households facing widespread economic hardship, received by many as an "oasis in the desert" (170-72). Exploring contemporary China, Guobin Yang and colleagues tackle the vulnerabilities of the digital age. Drawing on mixed-methods survey and interview data gathered around the COVID-19 pandemic from 106 respondents in several

Chinese metropolitan cities, mostly but not exclusively university students, the authors reveal a shared sense that we live in a risk age. Participants noted that social media seeks to "prey upon (掠夺) consumers' time" and exposes them to a "flooding of misinformation." Consequently, users constantly try to cultivate hobbies centered on "self-control (自我把控)" or "self-watchfulness." Drawing on Michel Foucault's care of the self and Confucian self-care through self-support, the authors showcase how internet users constantly develop mechanisms to survive digital vulnerabilities by seeking help from trusted friends, a practice that can be labeled the "art of living with technology."

The third part turns to Latin America, returning to the *lo popular* framework raised earlier and testing it against two different registers. Claudia Magallanes-Blanco's chapter examines indigenous community radio in Oaxaca, Mexico, extending research into Indigenous community media in Mexico that she has pursued for more than twenty years. Indigenous-produced media, she argues, "offer possibilities for self-representation in the face of Western, colonial media discourses that construct a social imaginary about that which is Indigenous" (212). María Soledad Segura, Alejandro Linares, and Rose Dayanne Santana Nogueira then shift to a more institutional register, examining the audience ombudsman's office, a mechanism present in several Latin American broadcasting systems for representing audience interests within media policy, and asking what a decolonial framework adds to an institution more commonly studied through governance or accountability alone. Their answer is double-edged: the ombudsman's offices "were not designed from a decolonial and/or intersectional perspective," and yet in practice they still "pay attention to the diversities and inequalities inherent to" the communities they serve (224). Read together, the two chapters move from grassroots practice toward institutional analysis, giving the Latin America section a different center of gravity than the Africa and Asia sections that precede it.

The final section turns to the Middle East. Joe Khalil provides an interesting study of how historical events have mutated and transformed audience discourses in the region. Khalil states that terms such as *Ummah* (أُمّة), *Al-Jamaheer* (الجماهير), and the Arab street (الشارع العربي) reflect different socio-cultural contexts and ideologies regarding Arab audiences. He asserts that studying these audiences requires methodologies that "foreground cultural specificity and move beyond one-size-fits-all frameworks" (Khalil 261). Dina Matar problematizes the notion of the Palestinian audience in "times of permanent war and excessive mediation" (Matar 266). Taking the 2023-2024 Israeli genocidal war against Gaza as a starting point, Matar notes how dominant media privileges Israeli narratives while underreporting Palestinian suffering. Palestinians, she argues, become "de-audienced." The excessive sharing of horrific videos documenting their suffering becomes "banal and commonsensical," leading to underreporting by Western media corporations like the BBC. Tarik Sabry's chapter navigates the nuances of performing arts in the Middle East that are inherently "audience-centered," positing that the audience's mnemonic experience and *Augenblick* moments hold paramount value, rather than centering the focus entirely on the performer. The section closes with Erdem Güven's study of nostalgia for Turkish state broadcasting under the TRT era in contemporary Türkiye, a reminder that the book's Middle East is not reducible to the Arab world alone.

*Decolonising Approaches to Users and Audiences* is a paramount work of decolonial research in the Global South. One of the book's primary academic merits is that it provides a clearer view of how internet users interact with digital ecosystems and how new media democratizes the communicative act. It also beautifully illustrates how the subaltern invents new ways to speak truth to power, shifting the paradigms of knowledge production. Nevertheless, the book cannot single-handedly tackle all issues related to audiences in the

Global South. Yang and colleagues' study, for example, draws on a self-consciously privileged sample of educated, metropolitan internet users, as the authors themselves acknowledge, highlighting the need for further research into the digital habitus of less advantaged voices in China. Similarly, the studies by Khalil, Matar, and Sabry are foundational but not exhaustive, as every society in the Middle East holds its own particularities and socio-political conditions. Ultimately, *Decolonising Approaches to Users and Audiences* is a masterful collection that successfully paves the way for further decolonial studies and interrogations.




**CONFLUENCE**
**Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies**

**ISSN:** 3085-5411
**Journal Homepage**: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

# *Handbook on Intangible Cultural Practices as Global Strategies for the Future: Twenty Years of the UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage,* edited by Christoph Wulf. Springer, 2025. 579 pp., ISBN 978-3-031-72122-9.

**Omar Artal**
Eötvös Loránd University

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-voliss.6533

**Omar Artal** is a historian and cultural heritage researcher affiliated with the Doctoral School of Historical Sciences at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. His doctoral research examines the interconnectedness of cultural heritage, Islam, and national identity in the Gulf States, with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Drawing on comparative, conceptual, and historiographical approaches, his work explores how heritage institutions, religious narratives, and cultural policies contribute to contemporary processes of nation-building.

Omar@student.elte.hu https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0295-3243

Received: 13-11-2025 Accepted: 10-04-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

# Book Review

## *Handbook on Intangible Cultural Practices as Global Strategies for the Future: Twenty Years of the UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage,* edited by Christoph Wulf. Springer, 2025. 579 pp., ISBN 978-3-031-72122-9.

**Omar Artal**
Eötvös Loránd University

This handbook arrives twenty years after the adoption of the 2003 UNESCO Convention, a moment when the social, political, and environmental significance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is coming under progressively closer global scrutiny. Following the editor Christoph Wulf's illuminating introduction, "Living Cultures in the Anthropocene," this collection locates ICH as a necessary resource for understanding various forms of global transformation that are taking place throughout our planet today—from climate change and demographic shifts to nuanced implications of digitalization and social fragmentation. The key thesis of the book is that ICH practices, by virtue of their corporeal, performative, and mimetically transmitted nature, should not be considered remnants of a bygone past (so-called archaic survivals) but vibrant, future-oriented forms of cultural know-how.

Wulf's opening essay theorizes and stages the institutional frame for the anthology, one of its most substantive contributions. Basing his discussion on historical and cultural anthropology, he contends that intangible cultural heritage is inherently associated with the physical body and its performance, reproduction, and recreation. Here he offers a concise summary of his abiding theoretical repertoire—mimesis, somatic learning, ritualization—to explain why ICH continues and remains socially meaningful. It is this theoretical framework that brings an unusual sense of coherence to the handbook, given its size and nature as an edited collection. It also provides readers with a conceptual language for analyzing the case studies that follow, which include European craft traditions as well as ritual traditions in East Asia and Latin America.

The introduction offers a critical review of how intangible heritage is being defined, documented, and managed at national and international levels. In Wulf's conceptual formulation:

> Heritage is an open generic term for all those tangible and intangible assets inherited from a past to which individuals, communities, or humanity as a whole attach salient importance. What is heritage for a community emerges as a consequence of a complex dynamic of determination and selection as well as of proving, updating, transforming and appropriating through practice and interpretative approaches. (4)

Then, Wulf takes us through different kinds of systems, contrasting the codified systems in countries like Japan and Korea—which are often based on stringent government legislation and deliberate processes and practices for knowledge transmission—with more liberalized, cooperative approaches, as seen in Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. The comprehensive examination of the German model, encompassing its federal architecture, the

Contact ✉ Omar@student.elte.hu
©2026

processes of selection at the state level, and the criteria for eligibility, is especially illuminating and will prove useful for researchers seeking to understand the mechanisms underpinning national records and UNESCO nominations. Through a meticulous examination of the dynamics among governmental entities, non-governmental organizations, and specialized advisory panels, Wulf underscores the inherently political dimensions involved in the process of heritage selection, achieving this without resorting to the reductionist celebratory or technocratic rhetoric that frequently typifies publications associated with UNESCO.

The handbook's five sections span significant geographical and thematic ground. The first section focuses on intangible heritage as a force for social change, including articles by two senior UNESCO officials and leading national policymakers who are looking back over twenty years of the impact of the Convention. For the most part, these chapters are descriptive, though they manage to situate ICH in broader institutional discourses of global public goods, participatory governance, and sustainable development. The second part turns to colonial legacies, minorities, race, and inequality. Chapters on Africa, Brazil, the United States, Indonesia, and Europe examine how existing power relationships shape heritage recognition. The inclusion of case studies that emphasize racialization, exclusion, and the persistence of colonialism matters greatly, given that UNESCO heritage frameworks have long carried a Eurocentric epistemological bias.

The third part examines the influence of ICH on identity formation, conflict generation, and community development. Contributions from Germany, Poland, Switzerland, Korea, China, Colombia, and the Arab world demonstrate the different interpretations and applications of the 2003 Convention by states and communities. The strength of this section lies in its rich empirical evidence, which reveals that the adoption of ICH guidelines is influenced by local governance practices, political contexts, and social systems. Nevertheless, at times, the connections between these chapters and the editor's theoretical perspective seem more implicit than explicit, prompting readers to deduce how the case studies connect to issues of performativity or mimetic transmission. For example, Chapter 14 on Switzerland offers a rich account of federal administrative processes and cultural-policy debates, but it does not link these empirical materials to Wulf's broader focus on embodiment, mimesis, or performativity. Practices such as avalanche-risk management—listed by UNESCO and grounded in embodied, mimetic forms of learning—are presented mainly as administrative items rather than examined through the theoretical perspective the editor proposes.

Part four explores "aesthetic encounters," including music, modern dance, museums, and new institutional environments such as the Humboldt Forum. These chapters effectively demonstrate how ICH circulates within professionalized cultural sectors and the tensions that emerge when community-based practices are reframed through artistic, curatorial, or museological logics. Wulf's own contribution in this section revisits his triad of body–mimesis–performativity and links it to European choral and ritual traditions. Wulf argues that "[a]s practical knowledge, mimesis and performativity are mutually intertwined—for example in the cases of rituals, dances, or gestures—, repetition of the cultural practices plays an important role in the transfer of intangible cultural knowledge" (433).

While this provides a strong theoretical anchor, it also means that other perspectives—for example, feminist approaches to embodiment or postcolonial critiques of museology—are less present than they might have been, given their prominence in contemporary heritage scholarship. A brief engagement with these perspectives would have strengthened the analytical balance of this part of the handbook.

The final part of the volume examines the emerging complexities associated with The final part of the volume examines the emerging complexities associated with digitalization, youth,

cultural economies, and the recovery process following disasters. The chapters on post-digital cultures and social media are especially valuable in this regard. The exploration of children and youth comes at a relevant time, especially as it emphasizes how patterns of digital consumption may interfere with learning across generations. Although these contributions are enlightening, they tend to be mostly descriptive and could have gained from a more profound theoretical exploration of digital anthropology or netnography. Several chapters in this section also introduce concerns related to cultural economies and the role of ICH as a modality of care—topics that are promising but treated rather briefly and that would have benefited from deeper theoretical grounding. Conversely, the chapter discussing Fukushima's *Soma Nomaoi* festival and *Obori Soma Yaki* pottery presents a fascinating examination of how communities navigate cultural continuity in the aftermath of a disaster. It eloquently shows that when disasters change communities, social dynamics, and physical landscapes, the resulting cultural practices inevitably evolve as well. This piece stands out as one of the most compelling empirical studies in the handbook and clearly demonstrates how deeply intertwined cultural recovery and social transformation can be.

One of the book's important arguments is that intangible cultural heritage should be understood as a living, embodied, and socially generative set of practices that help communities navigate contemporary transformations, from environmental pressures to demographic shifts and policy structures such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The chapters that connect ICH with education for sustainable development and the SDGs are among the most innovative, particularly in their argument that intangible heritage should be understood as a cultural asset and a pedagogical environment in which ethics, empathy, and intergenerational responsibility are cultivated. Whether one accepts the SDGs as an appropriate structure for cultural policy will determine how persuasive this argument appears. The handbook generally treats the SDGs as a constructive horizon rather than interrogating their developmentalist assumptions or their tensions with community autonomy. Likewise, the Anthropocene is presented as a common global challenge, with minimal discussion of critiques advocating for different perspectives like the *Capitalocene* or *Plantationocene*.[1] A more thorough examination of these alternative framings may have broadened the book's theoretical scope. These are not missed opportunities so much as reflections of the book's orientation: it is committed to building bridges between heritage scholarship and global governance frameworks rather than scrutinizing those frameworks from a critical distance. Readers particularly attuned to decolonial or political-economic critiques may therefore find some of the book's commitments aspirational rather than analytically rigorous.

For scholars (including myself) approaching the volume from critical heritage studies,[2] the handbook may appear to adopt a more normative than analytical orientation. The more radical critiques of UNESCO's heritage regimes, including their epistemological foundations and institutional asymmetries, receive comparatively limited attention. Nevertheless, these reservations coexist with the recognition that the handbook offers something quite exceptional: a combination of institutional overview, theoretical synthesis, and empirical diversity that will be indispensable for students, policymakers, and researchers engaged with the 2003 UNESCO ICH Convention. In sum, this is a convincing and ambitious volume that succeeds in presenting intangible cultural heritage as a dynamic and socially significant field of practice. Its most original contribution lies in its overarching insistence—articulated clearly by Wulf and echoed by many contributors—that heritage must be understood as a living, embodied, and future-oriented set of practices rather than as a fragile residue of the past. While not all readers will agree with its normative commitments, the handbook will undoubtedly become a key reference for anyone working on ICH, sustainability, and the cultural politics of the Anthropocene. It will be an important resource for quite a broad audience, including graduate students in cultural

studies, heritage practitioners, and policymakers who need a state-of-the-art and theoretically informed picture of the first two decades of the Convention.

## Notes

1. For the "Capitalocene" framing, see the collection edited by Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. For the "Plantationocene," see Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and the debates introduced in Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*, which foreground the plantation as a historical ecology shaping contemporary global inequalities.

2. Foundational texts include Laurajane Smith, *The Uses of Heritage* (Routledge, 2006), which argues that heritage is shaped by an "Authorized Heritage Discourse"; and Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Routledge, 2013), which outlines the political, epistemological, and institutional dynamics underpinning heritage classification systems.