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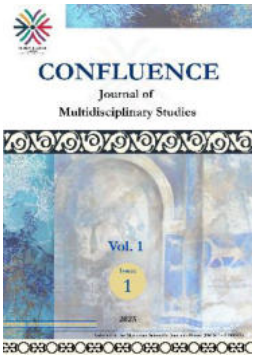
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Editor-in-Chief: **Brahim Barhoun**

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Editorial: Inaugural Issue of *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*

Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies offers a rigorous, inclusive, and internationally engaged platform for academic discourse across the humanities and social sciences. Launched in 2025 by members of the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural & Interdisciplinary Studies Research Laboratory at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, in partnership with IMIST-CNRST, the journal aims to foster scholarly production that transcends disciplinary boundaries and national borders.

Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies aspires to provide Moroccan and regional scholars a direct pathway into international scholarly conversations. Through its open-access model and robust double-blind peer review process, the journal not only ensures high-quality research but also promotes equitable access to knowledge production and dissemination.

The journal's scope encompasses a broad array of disciplines, including Language and Linguistics, Literature, Cultural Studies, Translation Studies, History, Media Studies, Pedagogy, and Digital Technologies. This inaugural issue exemplifies the journal's commitment to thematic and methodological plurality, engaging with critical questions at the intersection of politics, culture, technology, and representation.

Opening the issue, Karim Bejjit's "The North African Desert in American Travel Writing" traces the symbolic and imaginative evolution of the Sahara in American travel narratives, from early captivity tales to mid-twentieth-century literary pilgrimages. The desert becomes a site where romance, spirituality, violence, and colonial fantasy are projected, thereby sustaining its status as both an exotic spectacle and a resistant terrain. Following this, in "Graphic Occupation: Joe Sacco and the Artwork of Bearing Witness," Sawsan Malla Hussein analyzes Sacco's visual journalism through the lens of peace studies and testimonial ethics. Sacco's work subverts journalistic neutrality, blending historical reconstruction with personal testimony to disrupt hegemonic media narratives around Gaza.

Rajae Khaloufi's "Performance Knowledge and Practices beyond Dominant Discourses and Geographies" engages with the post-war Bosnian production *Crossing the Lines* to explore performance as a form of political resistance and psychosocial healing. Through testimonial art and embodied practice, the work facilitates community rebuilding and challenges historical silences. Continuing with literature and symbolic resistance, Brahim Barhoun's "Magical

Feminism as Ontological Resistance in Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair*" foregrounds the political potential of magical realism, framing Alaoui's narrative as a feminist, insurgent intervention against patriarchal hegemony, wherein mythic figures and symbolic spaces become sites of feminine epistemology. As Editor-in-Chief of *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, Barhoun recused himself from the editorial handling of this article and of the co-authored interview included in this issue. Both were managed independently by other members of the editorial board to ensure impartiality.

The discussion then turns to media discourse. Sara Rguig's "The Representation of the Arab Spring in the U.S. Media" employs Critical Discourse Analysis to expose Orientalist tropes in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Her study reveals the ideological role of language in portraying Arabs as violent and irrational while reinforcing Western superiority. A regional media perspective follows in Omar Kouiyache and Oussama Badad's "Shifting Currents," which examines Moroccan and Spanish media coverage of irregular migration before and after Spain's political realignment on the Moroccan Sahara. Their comparative analysis demonstrates the impact of diplomatic shifts on public discourse, reframing migration from a humanitarian crisis to a narrative of bilateral cooperation. Continuing the theme of changing societal narratives, Hafssa Chahbane and Khalid Houssaini's "Leadership in the Age of Content Creators and Influencers" extends the discussion to digital culture, drawing on Moroccan case studies to argue that influencers represent a new paradigm of grassroots authority and mobilization.

Turning to travel, gender, and cultural experience, Aicha Bouchara and Jihane Benmassoud's "Exploring the Experiences of International Solo Women Travelers to Morocco" presents a qualitative account of safety, empowerment, and intercultural exchange. While Morocco's cultural richness draws visitors, persistent concerns over harassment and inadequate public infrastructure remain.

In the field of translation studies, Abdelmajid El Sayd's "The Interplay of Linguistic and Cultural Factors in Translating Theatrical Concepts" compares Moroccan practices for rendering English theatrical terms, advocating for approaches grounded in cultural context and informed by both classical and modern theory. Habiba Nakhli's "Gender in Translation Discourse" applies feminist translation theory to challenge patriarchal norms, showing through specific instances how "feminizing" translation strategies assert both visibility and ideological resistance.

Technological transformations and education are taken up by the rest of the articles. Chukwuma Livinus Ndububa and Bibian Ugoala's "Digital Pragmatics and Human Identity" examines interactions with chatbots, revealing distinct patterns of identity negotiation across ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini. Nafiaa Bouanani's "The Impact of AI on University Students' Academic Assertiveness" then narrows the focus to higher education, identifying both the confidence-enhancing potential and the autonomy-reducing risks of AI writing tools. Didi Naoufal's "Educational Integrity" discusses ethical frameworks for AI governance in Moroccan higher education, advocating a "glocal" policy approach rooted in cultural and religious principles. Abderrazak Zaafour's "Language Learning Through Collaboration" closes the articles' section with a study of Cooperative Project-Based Learning (CPBL) applied across Morocco, the U.S., the UK, and the Philippines, demonstrating its capacity to boost motivation, cognitive engagement, and cross-cultural competence.

The issue also includes "On Exile, Migration, and Hybrid Identity," a reflective interview by Mariam Bouaoud and Brahim Barhoun with Moroccan novelist Abdelhamid El Beyuki. The discussion delves into exile as a psychological condition and writing as a space of memory, resistance, and ethical imagination. El Beyuki articulates a vision of literature that challenges

cultural essentialism, confronts marginalization, and reaffirms plurality and belonging through storytelling.

The issue concludes with two thoughtful book reviews. Hakima Choukri's review of *The Experimental Turn in the Moroccan Novel, 1976–1989*, by Anouar El Younssi, commends the work for mapping a new trajectory in Moroccan literary historiography and for situating experimental Moroccan fiction within global theoretical conversations. In the second review, Ahlam El Haddad reads Eric Calderwood's *On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of Al-Andalus*, noting its critical interrogation of Andalusi memory as a politicized metaphor in modern cultural discourse.

2025 marks the founding year of the publication of *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*. In 2025, we have decided to publish a single issue to establish our peer-review and editorial workflows. Beginning January 2026, *Confluence* will publish two issues annually, in January and July, providing authors with regular publication opportunities and ensuring compliance with the periodicity requirements of major international indexing databases. The schedule is intended to maximize the scholarly visibility of our authors' work and contribute to the journal's future eligibility for global indexation.

This inaugural issue is the product of a sustained and coordinated effort. We extend our sincere gratitude to the journal's editorial and advisory boards. Their intellectual guidance and disciplinary breadth have been instrumental in shaping this endeavor. We also acknowledge the indispensable support of IMIST-CNRST and Abdelmalek Essaadi University and their commitment to promoting critical scholarship.

As we inaugurate *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, we do so with a shared conviction that scholarship should be accessible, collaborative, and transformative. We look forward to publishing future issues that will further enrich disciplinary knowledge, promote cross-cultural dialogue, and sustain the ethical imperative of academic inquiry.

On behalf of the entire editorial team, we welcome you to *Confluence*.

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

As Editor-in-Chief of *Confluence Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, I am the author of one article and co-author of one interview included in this issue. The peer review and editorial decision-making for both contributions were conducted independently by other members of the editorial board to ensure objectivity and uphold the journal's ethical standards.

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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial **i**
Editor-in-Chief

Articles:

The North African in American Travel Writing **1**
Karim Bejjit

Graphic Occupation: Joe Sacco and the Artwork of Bearing Witness **14**
Sawsan Malla Hussein

Performance Knowledge and Practices beyond Dominant Discourses and Geographies: Glimpses from *Crossing the Lines* **37**
Rajae Khaloufi

Magical Feminism as Ontological Resistance in Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms* **52**
Brahim Barhoun

The Representation of the Arab Spring in the U.S. Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis **73**
Sara Rguig

Shifting Currents: *Hespress* and *El País* Framing of Irregular Migration Before and After Spain's Recognition of the Moroccan Sahara **91**
Omar Kouiyache and Oussama Badad

Leadership in the Age of Content Creators and Influencers: A New Paradigm of Influence and Authority **109**
Hafssa Chahbane and Khalid Houssaini

Exploring the Experiences of International Solo Women Travelers to Morocco **120**
Aicha Bouchara and Jihane Benmassoud

The Interplay of Linguistic and Cultural Factors in Translating Theatrical Concepts: A Comparative Analysis of Translation Theories and Practices **139**
Abdelmajid El Sayd

Gender in Translation Discourse: From Subordination to Subversion **152**
Habiba Nakhli

Digital Pragmatics and Human Identity in Interactions with Selected AI Chatbots **166**
Chukwuma Livinus Ndububa and Bibian Ugoala

The Impact of AI on University Students' Academic Assertiveness: The Case of Academic Writing **185**
Nafiaa Bouanani

Educational Integrity: Ethical and Regulatory Perspectives on Generative AI in Moroccan Higher Education **208**
Didi Naoufal

Language Learning Through Collaboration: A Reflective Transcontinental Study on Students' Experiences with Cooperative Projects **222**
Abderrazak Zaafour

Interview:

On Exile, Migration, and Hybrid Identity: An Interview with Abdelhamid El Beyuki **239**
Mariam Bouaoud and Brahim Barhoun

Book Reviews:

The Experimental Turn in the Moroccan Novel, 1976-1989: Book Review **248**
Hakima Choukri

On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of Al-Andalus: Book Review **252**
Ahlam El Haddad



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The North African Desert in American Travel Writing

Karim Bejjit
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan
LLCIS Research Laboratory

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Karim Bejjit is Professor of English and American Studies at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco and Coordinator of the doctoral program "New Trends in Linguistic, Literary and Cultural Studies." He is the author of *English Colonial Texts on Tangier, 1661-1684: Imperialism and the Politics of Resistance* (Ashgate, 2015; Routledge 2016). His other publications include a book on 19th-century European Travel discourse on Morocco, a volume of short stories, and several book chapters and peer-reviewed journal articles in English and Arabic.

k.bejjit@uae.ac.ma

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2689-620X

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The North African Desert in American Travel Writing

Karim Bejjit
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan
LLCIS Research Laboratory

ABSTRACT

This essay deals with the construction of the desert in American travel discourse since the early eighteenth century. While early American accounts of the desert were the result of unfortunate incidents of shipwreck along the southern shores of Morocco beyond Oued Noun, and reflected the experiences of bondage and salvation, later accounts framed the Sahara across North Africa in subtler and more poetic terms. The Sahara has evolved in these numerous narratives as a space of romance, intrigue and spirituality as well as locale of unspeakable violence and horror. Despite the changing circumstances and the advent of European colonialism and modern capitalism, the Sahara remains an untamed wilderness shielded by the vastness of its land and extreme aridity of the climate. Since mid-twentieth century, North African desert has become a tourist attraction and a place of pilgrimage for writers seeking inspiration and creative material.

KEYWORDS

Desert

North Africa

Travel Writing

Captivity Narratives

American Writers

Introduction

The desert has emerged as a significant topic in discussions about space representation, particularly within environmental studies, ecocriticism, and postcolonial theory. Contemporary reflections on the desert draw from multiple disciplines and address various issues, including ecological crises, shifting geopolitical dynamics, international terrorism, mass migration, and global epidemics.

While descriptions of the desert abound in geographical textbooks, encyclopedias, and travel narratives, and its vast arid landscapes frequently feature in magazines, documentaries and adventure films, the study of the desert as a distinct category has gained traction only in recent years. Traditional narratives often portray the desert as a marginal and amorphous space associated with emptiness, scarcity, and death. In contrast to urban areas or fertile plains, European accounts frame the desert as an uncharted territory explored by Western adventurers, who were often motivated by a desire to serve the empire or by a fascination with exotic and uncanny modes of life. Depictions of desert landscapes in literature have received little critical scrutiny and have not developed into a distinct poetics of spatiality in academic studies. Writings about the desert have overlooked its multifaceted nature, approaching it through the narrow lens of specific disciplines, whether in environmental sciences, literature, or history.

Contact ✉ k.bejjit@uae.ac.ma
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The recognition of the desert as a site for interdisciplinary research began with the rise of ecocriticism, which sought to link literary representation with natural landscapes and environmental issues. Earlier ecocritical works devoted little attention to the desert compared to other topographies like the pastoral, the garden and the jungle. However, at the turn of the millennium, the desert attracted increasing interest from scholars across various fields as a category of study in its own right. David Jasper's *The Sacred Desert* (2004), for instance, provides a genealogy of the desert in Western theology and philosophy, critiquing modern literary and artistic works that engage with it.

In the American context, Catrin Gersdorf's important study, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* (2009), challenges traditional European myths of America as a land of abundance, and highlights the role played by the desert both as physical landscape and ideological construct in shaping American identity over the past century. Gersdorf structures her study around four eco-spatial metaphors to clarify America's connection to the desert. The first metaphor is the garden, symbolizing cultivation and prosperity, which she contrasts with the wilderness, representing an untamed space that evokes the wild and generative aspects of nature. She also employs the metaphor of the Orient, both in aesthetic and ethical terms, highlighting elements of exoticism and otherness frequently associated with the Arabian desert. Lastly, the desert is analyzed through the lens of heterotopia, a socio-cultural model introduced by Foucault that describes spaces that differ from or oppose ordinary ones, functioning as sites of resistance and alternative social orders (Gersdorf).

The exploration of the desert as a symbol and space gained further momentum with the publication of Gary Nabhan's edited volume of essays, *The Nature of Desert Nature* (2020). Nabhan argues that understanding deserts requires imaginative engagement that challenges preconceived notions and stereotypes. He advocates for a shift away from dualistic thinking—such as barren versus vibrant—to recognize the paradoxes inherent in these landscapes (Nabhan). His edited volume of essays brings together the works of artists, scientists, and cultural historians on the deserts. Rather than being seen as empty spaces, deserts in this study are depicted as dynamic ecosystems full of potential. As global climate change increases the prevalence of arid landscapes, Nabhan notes, there is an urgent need to understand their resilience and complexity. Nabhan's work invites readers to rethink their understanding of deserts, appreciating not only the enchanting qualities that they evoke in sensory and imaginative terms, but also recognizing their multidimensional environments shaped by both physical conditions and cultural discourses.

Another important contribution to the study of the desert is Aidan Tynan's *The Desert in Modern Literature and Philosophy* (2020). Adopting a geophilosophical approach, it offers a profound exploration of the desert as a multifaceted concept, drawing heavily on philosophical texts, particularly the work of Nietzsche. Tynan presents the desert as a space for thought and self-overcoming within a metaphysical framework. By blurring the lines between 'real' and metaphorical deserts, Tynan challenges conventional notions of place and belonging, positioning them as rhetorical constructions that reflect contemporary ecological crises. The emergence of the desert as an aesthetic category, he argues, aligns with modernity, moving beyond Romantic notions of the sublime to explore the abstract nature of space (Tynan).

This article draws on these debates to explore the theme of the desert in American travel writings set in North Africa. It aims at highlighting the desert's genealogical discursivity as an alien and hostile territory and an arena for American subjects to confront their inner selves. As I elaborate in the following pages, American perceptions of the desert are shaped by a logic of mutual violence, evolving alongside concepts of American power and dominance. This

perspective reveals a dual effort: to penetrate and conquer the vast, hostile landscape while simultaneously confronting the risks of destruction and enchantment. Although these desert narratives are rooted in solitary experiences tied to specific temporal and spatial contexts, they also exhibit a distinct poetic and philosophical quality.

The Desert and the Specter of Captivity and Death

The oldest and perhaps most enduring images of the North African desert as a place of desolation, loss, and servitude in American literature date back to the early years of the republic. Captain James Riley's *An Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce* (1815) depicts horrific scenes of US seamen shipwrecked on the southern shores of Morocco and their captivity by desert Bedouins. The journey to freedom is fraught with indignities and disappointments. Stripped of their clothes and forced to walk long distances under the scorching sun, the captives face the full force of the desert, and soon, under the weight of poor nutrition, heat, and physical exhaustion, their bodies and spirits wither. Their salvation comes only when the walls of Essaouira come into view. Facing the Atlantic, Essaouira was often hailed as a civilized outpost on the fringe of the vast wilderness. The presence of European merchants in the city was a reliable sign of the end of their travails. In the case of Riley and a few of his crewmembers, deliverance came at the hands of a young British trader, Mr. William Willshire, whose house welcomed numerous captives he ransomed in the years that followed.[1] The shipwreck of European and American vessels was common, and the enslavement of sailors by Bedouin tribes, for all its horrors, provided them with a means of survival against the harshness of nature (Riley).

For the first half of the nineteenth century, *An Authentic Narrative* was a bestseller in America. In 1828, Riley published a revised edition that became the standard version, reprinted "every two or three years between 1829 and 1852" (Ratcliffe 197). The public's interest in the captivity of US sailors in North Africa was linked to the expansion of American trade and shipping in the Mediterranean. While the American consular presence established in the main port cities of Barbary after independence aimed to serve US diplomatic and commercial interests, relations with Barbary polities were often difficult. Since the 1780s, American merchant ships had been attacked by North African corsairs, resulting in hundreds of US marines being held for ransom in Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. Peace treaties were short-lived, and war was often inevitable. By 1816, American fleets had several encounters with Algerian and Tripolitan corsairs. The most dramatic naval conflict occurred against Tripoli from 1801 to 1805, which had a sobering effect on the US government and led to an increase in US naval power in the Mediterranean.

These political developments did not go unnoticed by the public. As several historians have noted, American newspapers provided extensive coverage of the events and publicized charitable efforts to secure the release of the captives.[2] Several personal accounts and journals of redeemed captives were published, giving rise to a new genre later known as the Barbary captivity narrative.[3] Contemporary literary writers and dramatists, emphasizing the superiority of American laws and the patriotic nature of American citizens abroad, also depicted scenes of captivity and servitude in their works.[4]

Riley's narrative takes place in a part of Barbary that was little known to early Americans. While Moroccan ports welcomed American trading vessels and friendly relations with the Sharifian Empire were established by the treaty negotiated by Thomas Barclay in June 1786, the southern shores of Morocco posed significant navigation hazards (P.H. Roberts and R.S. Roberts). Landing on the arid coast often led to captivity. A clause in the treaty stipulated that

American citizens captured by a subject of his majesty were to be "immediately set at liberty" ("Treaty"). When Riley and his shipmates were captured by Bedouin tribes, their only hope for release lay in reaching the port of Essaouira, where the Sultan's representative was obligated to act according to the treaty. The journey to Essaouira often incurred significant expenses for the captives, as they were forced to make generous promises to their captors in exchange for freedom.

The shipwreck of the brig *Commerce* is also depicted in another narrative by Archibald Robbins, a shipmate of Riley's whose captivity lasted much longer and involved even greater toil and deprivation. In the preface of his journal, Robbins states that [5]his aim in publishing his account was partly to "obtain, if possible, a small remuneration for the unprecedented privations and sufferings of which I have been the unfortunate subject" (iii). Like Riley's, the financial success of the journal was assured by numerous reprints in the following decades. It is difficult to explain the source of the avid interest of nineteenth-century American readers in these captivity tales. The vast desert territory south of Oued Noun was seen as *terra incognita*, inhabited by people driven by poverty and a nomadic lifestyle, and above all, by the cruelty of the elements that led them to act brutally against Christian sailors who happened to land on their shores. This presents an interesting contrast to earlier captivity narratives set in Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. The accounts of James Cathcart (1788), John Foss (1798), Jonathan Cowdery (1803), and William Ray (1803), for instance, provide firsthand sketches of Muslim urban landscapes and civil communities. The cultural landscape they portrayed was defined and had some degree of fixity, even if ultimately it seems at odds with early America's Puritan culture and secular institutions. In contrast, accounts set in the desert had a nebulous frame of reference; their authors relied heavily on haphazard itineraries and self-pitying narratives to construct a new *topos* for their stories. The novelty of this uncharted writing lies in the significant role the desert plays as a space of erasure and disintegration, as well as resistance and rebirth.

Soon after the publication of Riley's account, Judah Paddock's *A Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Oswego* was published. Although the incidents it relates date back to the early 1800s, the tale portrays a similar course of events and introduces an equally bleak landscape. When the stranded captain surveyed the surrounding terrain, he was overwhelmed with anxiety:

> What could I see? A barren sand, without either tree or shrub, or the least appearance of vegetation; dreary in every respect; and at a distance back, a long range of mountains extending east and west. Turning my view towards the ocean, and beholding the ship lying in the surf with her sails aloft, while thirteen of my shipmates were standing together before my eyes, the sight was too distressing for me to bear; I laid myself down on the sand, and gave vent to my grief by a flow of tears. (Paddock 19-20)

Judging by the number of subsequent editions, Paddock's narrative did not achieve the same popularity as Riley's or Robbins's accounts. The tale contains fewer dramatic incidents, and the sailors were only briefly subjected to the strains of bondage and famine. Six weeks after their captivity, the sailors reached Essaouira and were ransomed by the British consul. Nevertheless, a common feature shared with other shipwreck accounts is the depiction of the desert as a space of banishment, devoid of civil life and controlled by unruly natives indulging in various cruelties. In contrast to the homeland, the desert is portrayed as an abyss synonymous with disgrace and misfortune. Its emptiness is overwhelming and dispiriting. The combined effects of hunger, dehydration, prolonged sun exposure, and the lashings from their captors made the physical journey across the desert an ordeal. Yet, despite the meager diet and physical

exhaustion, the trauma of captivity invigorated the captives. The desert awakened their primitive survival instincts and renewed their faith in salvation. The appeal of these captivity tales lies in the American subject's ability to triumph over the harsh environment. Cast away in the remote Sahara, he endures his misfortunes with genuine fortitude and humility. The greater his sufferings, the more empathy his narrative evokes.

The uncanny experience of the desert continues to captivate generations of American readers today. Riley's account was published in a modern edition in 1965 and has recently been part of an ongoing scholarly discussion on America's early encounter with Islam[5] (Evans). In 2004, Dean King produced a fresh rendition of the narratives of Riley and Robbins, drawing on his own journey in the Sahara as he sought to retrace their footsteps on camelback. According to King, Riley's and Robbins's accounts impart valuable lessons for modern audiences about the possibility of coexistence, particularly in the tumultuous post-9/11 era (5).

Although King claims to share with Riley and Robbins a profound appreciation of the desert and has made efforts to convey a faithful narrative of their journey, the overall impression from his book leans more towards romance than a straightforward record of captivity's afflictions. The reimagining of the Sahara in modern literary narratives presents an interesting point of discussion regarding the aesthetics of representation and the evolution of travel discourse as it expands its scope and terminology into other disciplines. The next section of this article will examine how the Sahara is constructed in contemporary travel narratives and the discursive layers of modern American writing about the region.

The narratives of Riley, Robbins, and Paddock, along with those of their compatriots who faced similar challenges in Barbary, captured the attention of antebellum American readers because they offered raw personal testimonies of the horrors of slavery and the dangers of navigating the African coast. Their authors noted that, as seamen, they lacked the literary skill of established writers, but their accounts remained truthful and accurately reflected their lived experiences. In recovering the narratives of Riley and Robbins, Dean King has perhaps unwittingly altered their original meanings and reframed them in a way that resonates with the ethos of the new millennium.

The Desert as a Space of Enchantment

The reintegration of the desert into modern geographical discourse was closely linked to the European colonial process. By the early twentieth century, the Sahara had been incorporated into French and Spanish colonial empires. Its economy and social dynamics were profoundly disrupted by this change (Brower). With increased European penetration, the Sahara became connected to the global economy through military outposts, factories, villages, and monasteries, as well as through networks of communication and logistics (Porch). Military and scientific expeditions to the desert provided significant empirical data on its topographical and ethnographic aspects. The accounts of European explorers, missionaries, writers, and soldiers brought the Sahara closer to Western readers, expanding the realm of imagination in ways that, as Edward Said discusses in *Orientalism*, often reflected more European desires and fantasies than the realities of the desert.

The works of French writers and artists such as Eugène Fromentin, Pierre Loti, Charles de Foucauld, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and Isabelle Eberhardt have popularized new myths of the Sahara not as a place of banishment but as one of recreation, freedom, and inspiration. Positive images of desert nomads as custodians of ancient customs and fierce warriors have emerged to supplement the old clichés of the brutal Bedouin. In *Wind, Sand, and the Stars*, for example, Saint-Exupéry offers a vivid account of his plane accident in the Libyan Desert. Stranded for days in the vast expanse of hot sand dunes and tormented by thirst and hallucinations, he and

his companion were on the verge of collapse when an Arab Bedouin appeared. The Bedouin's name and face have been lost to history, but his generous act was immortalized by Saint-Exupéry in this poignant soliloquy:

> You, Bedouin of Libya who saved our lives, though you will dwell for ever in my memory yet I shall never be able to recapture your features. You are Humanity and your face comes into my mind as man incarnate. You, our beloved fellowman, did not know who we might be, and yet you recognized us without fail. And I, in my turn, shall recognize you in the faces of all mankind. You came towards me in an aureole of charity and magnanimity bearing the gift of water. (235)

Saint-Exupéry, a seasoned aviator who had flown the desert skies numerous times, embodies a modern type of European adventurer who, a century earlier, crossed the desert from Tangier to Timbuktu to map its contours and uncover its hidden riches, often at great peril. Unlike the straightforward narratives of US captives filled with the trauma of dislocation, these accounts convey both fascination and familiarity with the desert as a site of European intervention. The Sahara's harsh lands are, nonetheless, integrated into the imperial framework. The vast expanses of arid territory, now fully charted and divided, have transformed into familiar landscapes with recognizable names and boundaries in colonial administrative records. The colonial apparatus, securing both mobility and sustenance for the inhabitants, claims the Sahara as a vassal territory and extension of European power. When they embarked on their journeys, French writers like Loti, Saint-Exupéry, and Eberhardt operated within a pacified domain that owed allegiance to the French flag, even while maintaining its unmitigated foreignness. British and American writers who traveled within French colonial territories in North Africa enjoyed similar privileges, able to navigate remote towns and villages in the Sahara due to their status as Westerners. As Said argues at length in *Orientalism*, being a Westerner places one in a position of authority over the subjects and lands one writes about (5). This authority is grounded in the colonial machinery of control and the intellectual and ideological foundations of Western culture.

Moreover, the fluid mobility of Europeans across the North African Sahara, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, was facilitated by modern transportation and a growing tourism industry. Military campaigns during World War II and oil exploration ended the seclusion of the Sahara, opening its spaces to increasing European influence. One of the incidental outcomes of this steady penetration of the Sahara is the reconfiguration of its landscapes in modern literature into sites of frantic action, spirituality, and romance. Recent publications have highlighted significant themes dominating modern fictional narratives set in the Sahara, triggered by contemporary political events. Stories revolving around the French Foreign Legion, Cold War espionage, abduction, terrorism, and arms trafficking reveal the richness of the Western imagination and the enduring lore of the Sahara.[6]

With the notable exception of Paul Bowles, American writers have had much less contact with the Sahara than their French or British counterparts. Bowles' forays into the North African desert are made possible by pervasive French colonial institutions. His representations of the Sahara, particularly in *The Sheltering Sky* and the short stories "A Distant Episode" and "The Delicate Prey," echo the experiences reflected in André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* half a century earlier. As David Steel notes in his essay, the analogies between the two novels are numerous and highlight Gide's influence on Bowles. Certainly, Bowles's encounter with the Sahara shaped his vision and style in both fiction and travel writing. The themes of violence and death that characterize his earlier stories intertwine with the harshness and cruelty of desert

landscapes. In "The Delicate Prey," the journey of three Filala tribesmen across the desert turns into a gruesome spectacle of murder, rape, and mutilation. Similarly, the unnamed Professor in "A Distant Episode" faces traumatic scenes of humiliation and torture. After his tongue is cut out and he is taken into slavery, his sense of rationality deteriorates, and he quickly becomes a jester. When he finally escapes, his fate seems sealed as a social pariah.[7]

Like André Gide before him, Paul Bowles recognized the sinister power of the Sahara to lure and conquer the Western traveler. In *The Sheltering Sky*, his main characters, Port and Kit, flee their jaded life in New York and embark on a journey to the desert in search of solace and excitement. They soon fall victim to its oppressive hollowness, surrendering body and soul to its fateful force (Mossner).

In the early 1950s, Bowles traveled between Tangier and southern Algeria, writing short travel narratives that celebrated the spiritual and poetic impact of his journeys in the Sahara. In "Baptism of Solitude," for instance, Bowles describes the overwhelming sensation of being surrounded by the vast Sahara Desert:

> Immediately when you arrive in Sahara, for the first or the tenth time, you notice the stillness. An incredible, absolute silence prevails outside the towns; [...] you will either shiver and hurry back inside the walls, or you will go on standing there and let something very peculiar happen to you, something that everyone who lives there has undergone and which the French call 'le baptême de solitude.' It is a unique sensation, and it has nothing to do with loneliness, for loneliness presupposes memory. Here in this wholly mineral landscape lighted by stars like flares, even memory disappears, nothing is left but your own breathing and the sound of your heart beating. A strange, and by no means pleasant, process of reintegration begins inside you, and you have the choice of fighting against it, and insisting on remaining the person you have always been, or letting it take its course. For no one who has stayed in the Sahara for a while is quite the same as when he came. (71)

Jean Baudrillard, traveling across the California desert, makes a similar observation when he links the silence of the desert to its lingering visual effect:

> When you emerge from the desert, your eyes go on trying to create emptiness all around; in every inhabited area, every landscape they see desert beneath, like a watermark. It takes a long time to get back to a normal vision of things and you never succeed completely. Take this substance from my sight! . . . But the desert is more than merely a space from which all substance has been removed. Just as silence is not what remains when all noise has been suppressed. There is no need to close your eyes to hear it. For it is also the silence of time. (69)

The haunting visions of the desert are more than residues of an optical illusion; they inhabit consciousness with a disarming sensory force that no rational mind can explain. The silent gaze of the traveler instinctively replaces verbal communication to achieve communion. The energy that the Sahara imparts touches the traveler's soul before affecting his body. Its silence and emptiness evoke a mix of powerful sensations that extend beyond the immediate experience. An addiction-like urge follows this encounter, unleashing imagination and the desire for poetic expression.

Contemporary Reconfigurations of the Desert

In this final section, I discuss three contemporary American travelogues that capture the visceral experience of being in the Sahara, confronting its untamed force and seeking to unveil its mysteries. These narratives add to the imagery of male Westerners striving to penetrate its depths and observe the desert's secrets.

The first account, *The Tangier Diaries: 1962-1979*, is a journal by John Hopkins, a true heir of Paul Bowles, who experienced moments of enchantment while visiting the Moroccan Sahara during the 1960s and 1970s, when it was still under Spanish occupation. Like Bowles, Hopkins lived in cosmopolitan Tangier for many years, from which he explored the south of the country, crossing the Sahara repeatedly. His sojourns in the south inspired his writing. In one journal entry, he warns his readers: "Don't expect protection in the desert. The beauty is stark and uncompromising. There is no escaping it" (Hopkins, *The Tangier* 89).

Unlike Bowles, whose writings on the Sahara express the existential anxieties of modernity, Hopkins portrays the Sahara as a space for recreation and healing in his journal. The Sahara is a distinct aspect of Moroccan landscapes. Its emptiness and sparse vegetation mark variation from, rather than a rupture with, the topography of northern regions. The Sahara represents a social continuum with the rest of Morocco. In the south, or even in the then Spanish-controlled Sahara, the narrator connects easily with locals and quickly adapts to their way of life. Hopkins also uses the Sahara as a key setting in his novel, *Tangier Buzzless Flies*. The main character, Joseph Cabell, an American geologist hired by the Spanish government to prospect for oil in the Sahara, discovers vast reserves of water and phosphates instead, which could "turn the Sahara into a garden" (Hopkins, *Tangier Buzzless* 59). His vision of transforming the arid land into a new Eden receives no encouragement from the Spanish colonial authorities. By the novel's end, he agrees to continue the oil prospecting, wishing to remain in the desert. His attachment is spiritual, seemingly at odds with the materialist pursuits of the colonial regime. As an ardent dreamer, he believes the Sahara holds the last remnants of an uncorrupted world and must be protected from the encroachments of modern capitalist culture.

Joseph Cabell's fascination with the desert mirrors Hopkins's own connection to the land, which he visited frequently in his youth, although he captured it only through brief notes in his journal. The desert that emerges in the journal is a frontier that captivates the restless mind and infuses a sense of mysticism into the mundane life of urban dwellers. Observing his desert travel companions, Hopkins articulates sharp contrasts between desert and city life in eloquent terms:

> These people live with physical pain all their lives, while we are anguished by the mental. Their pain is assuaged by perfect spiritual assurance, while ours is aggravated by doubt. All their lives they have slept beneath the stars, where the spirit expands to fill the empty space, while our souls suffer from 'cabin fever.' (Hopkins, *The Tangier* 159)

There is a wealth of rich ethnographic detail about the desert in Hopkins's narrative of the Sahara. Set against a colonial backdrop, the Sahara features as a space increasingly marked by the encroachment of modern capitalism and its symbols of power. The stillness of the Sahara is disrupted by the sporadic establishment of colonial offices, barracks, and checkpoints. Military officers in their outlandish khaki attire move in armored vehicles, controlling the desert and policing its vast landscape with almost fanatical zeal. Nevertheless, despite its evident energy, the colonial establishment shows signs of decline. The harsh nature and enduring nomadic culture of ancestral times make the Sahara resilient.

William Langewiesche's account, *Sahara Unveiled*, set in the southern Algerian desert, offers a similar perspective on the desert's resilience. Despite the apparent intrusions of modernity, including roads, trucks, and televisions, "the Sahara remains unsubdued" (Langewiesche 4). Langewiesche approaches the Sahara with the prudence and reverence of a seasoned traveler. His aviation expertise and journalistic instinct, tempered by solid training in anthropology, shape his traveler's sensibility. Writing in the mid-1990s, during a cycle of gruesome violence in Algeria, he portrays the Sahara as a refuge from the chaos engulfing the country. Like Hopkins, Langewiesche is deeply interested in the human experience of the people he encounters along his journey. His itinerary from eastern Algeria to Niger through Tamanrasset seems driven by sympathy and curiosity rather than a fixed agenda. In a restrained, almost self-effacing tone, he shares his encounters with various native Saharans. Writing for a cosmopolitan audience, Langewiesche draws on the experiences of previous European explorers and his own to reveal what he believes is the true face of the Sahara. The result is a narrative rich in tales and anecdotes of Saharan life, reflecting the gradual changes since Algeria gained independence.

The strength of Langewiesche's account lies in the blend of ethnographic observation, historical context, and storytelling that creates a distinct narrative style. Despite the political crisis and the horrific, arbitrary massacres of civilians, Langewiesche's narrative exercises caution in voicing strong political opinions on the Algerian situation, focusing instead on the microcosmic social realities of a limited group of individuals from the Sahara. His portrayal honors their unique backgrounds and living conditions, emphasizing their role as interlocutors rather than passive informants. These interlocutors come from diverse social backgrounds and occupy different positions. As natives of the Sahara, they provide an insider's view of the desert as a homeland and a way of life, contrasting with the foreigner's often impressionistic characterizations.

One of the riveting scenes in the narrative involves the author's encounter with the respected and feared chief judge of Tamanrasset. His judicial power is bolstered by his zeal and moral integrity. His elegance, charm, and intellect make him an oddity in the remote oasis city. Langewiesche sees the judge as a courageous peer who, like a true American, takes great pleasure in his work:

> He had read widely, and had traveled, and had learned to understand himself in a world larger than his surroundings not because of his power but despite it. ... He spoke Arabic, French, English, Spanish, and a bit of Tamacheck. He woke up early every morning, and worked hard all day. He did not go home at midday, and did not take naps, and rarely relaxed. We became friends, and spent late nights talking about the larger world. (194)

His identification with the judge and their affectionate familiarity emboldened him to ask why he did not seek a better opportunity elsewhere. The judge's answer came in a circuitous way. He drove him up to see an old acquaintance, a veteran Bedouin who, through hard work, transformed the parched desert land into a vegetable farm. After a long life of challenges and losses, he felt his destiny was forever tied to his farm. Langewiesche concludes that for the judge, "the desert offered him frustration, but richness as well. He meant to admonish me. [He] and I were equals, men of the same age born into different circumstances, and he did not want my sympathy" (199).

Jeffrey Tayler's recent account, *Valley of the Casbahs*, also emphasizes the social and cultural background of the Sahara. The author, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco, experienced part of the desert in the late 1990s and became acquainted with Moroccan culture,

particularly in Marrakech. As he states in his preface, Tayler undertook the journey from Zagora across the Draa Valley to the Atlantic shores near Tan Tan because he was inspired by a dream to cross the vast southern Moroccan desert on camelback. Thesiger's *Arabian Sands* (1959) and Philip Hitti's renowned *The Arabs: A Short History* (1943) shaped his understanding of Arabian desert culture and ignited his passion for riding camels, even when vehicles were available and offered a more comfortable and economical means of transportation. Tayler may be viewed as a belated traveler and, to some extent, even a tourist posing as an adventurer. The old tradition of traveling through the Arabian desert, best described in the works of Wilfred Thesiger, T.E. Lawrence, and Richard Burton, belonged to an era of European imperial power. It must be noted that the mere thought of undertaking a similar journey in the new millennium sounds both regressive and sentimental.

Tayler's account follows a clear itinerary and offers close-up portraits of the various places and individuals he encounters on his short journey. Unlike the classic travel narratives he admires, set in a quasi-mythical Orient, his account introduces mundane scenes of rural and desert life devoid of drama and inspiration. A tone of frustration seeps into the narrative as the much-anticipated journey becomes a tedious tour marred by constant bickering with the guides. Instead of the colorful sensations one associates with distant, unexplored lands, the traveler finds only poor villages and douars lacking modern infrastructure, alongside stories of Moroccan households struggling to make a living. Nevertheless, the Sahara Tayler describes is not entirely cut off from the outside world. As he navigates the remote villages and Casbahs of the Draa Valley, he observes how echoes of world politics reach the edges of the Sahara through news networks like Al Jazeera. The gap between the temporal conditions of the native and the traveler, which earlier Western travel writers such as Thesiger, Saint-Exupéry, and Paul Bowles celebrated in their narratives, has now dissolved into a disconcerting contemporaneity.[8] In the post-9/11 context, Tayler's interlocutors, like the chief judge of Tamanrasset in Langewiesche's account, appear knowledgeable about current global affairs and can claim the present as much as the author does through the empowering medium of a TV set.

Yet even as they claim a certain covalence with the author, native interlocutors remain locked in their disadvantaged spatiality. Throughout the narrative, Tayler conveys the discontent visible in the faces of unemployed youths he encounters. Victims of a political establishment that neglects the periphery, they are objectified as subjects confined to their subaltern status, denied economic and political justice. In expressing his political sentiment, Tayler notably differs from both Hopkins and Langewiesche, whose accounts of the desert emphasize its unity, particularity, and resourcefulness. While they remain passive spectators before the Sahara, awed by its magical power and vastness, Tayler appeals to a rightist discourse to address the grievances presumably faced by Bedouin dwellers. Another prominent feature of *Valley of the Casbahs* is the centrality of the authorial voice. The subjective pronoun permeates the narrative as it meticulously details the day-to-day progress of the journey. The sense of immediacy and vivid description of the physical landscape contrast sharply with the poetic tone and concise expressions found in Hopkins's journal and even more so with Langewiesche's understated and euphemistic narration.

In these three accounts, therefore, one notes a different mode of representation and a different way of positioning and reflecting on the desert. The encounter in each of these narratives is a symbiosis of the making of the self and the physical experience of being in the desert. Despite their divergent approaches and constructions of the desert, these narratives derive their meaning and relevance from the premise that the desert still holds a vast potential for exploring not only ancient and simple modes of existence but also confronting the myths and uncertainties of identity in modern times.

Notes

1. William Willshire (sometimes spelled Wiltshire) resided in Mogador with his family from 1814 to 1844 and served his country in a diplomatic capacity; see Eamonn Gearon, *The Sahara: A Cultural History*. Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 214-215.
2. Lawrence A. Peskin, *Captives and Countrymen: Barbary Slavery and the American Public, 1785–1816*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009; David Dzurec, "A Speedy Release to Our Suffering Captive Brethren in Algiers: Captives, Debate, and Public Opinion in the Early American Republic." *The Historian* 71: 4 (2009): 735–756.
3. See Paul M. Baepler, *White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives*. University of Chicago Press, 1999; Robert J. Allison, editor, *Narratives of Barbary Captivity: Recollections of James Leander Cathcart, Jonathan Cowdery, and William Ray*. The Lakeside Press/R.R. Donnelley & Sons, 2007.
4. See Susanna H. Rowson, *Slaves in Algiers, or, a Struggle for Freedom*. Edited by Jennifer Margulis and Karen Poremski. Copley Publishing Group, 2000; James Ellison, *The American Captive: or, Siege of Tripoli*. Boston: Publisher, 1812; David Everett, "Slaves in Barbary." *The Columbian Orator*. Edited by Caleb Bingham, Boston: Publisher, 1817, pp. 102–118; Sarah Pogson, "The Young Carolinians; or, Americans in Algiers." *Essays, Religious, Moral, Dramatic & Poetical: Addressed to Youth, and Published for a Benevolent Purpose*. Charleston, SC: Archibald E. Miller, 1818, pp. 58–111.
5. See Robert Allison, *Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815*. University of Chicago Press, 2014; see also Anouar Majid. *Freedom and Orthodoxy: Islam and Difference in the Post-Andalusian Age*. Stanford University Press, 2004.
6. See Eamonn Gearon, *The Sahara: A Cultural History*. Oxford University Press, 2011; see also David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art and Culture*. Blackwell, 2006.
7. Jeffrey Meyers has noted strong similarities between "A Distant Episode" and a story written by Albert Camus a decade earlier titled "The Renegade." See, Jeffery Meyers, "Paul Bowles and Albert Camus: Theme and Variation." *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 42: 2 (2012).
8. Johannes Fabian has expounded the notion of "denial of coevalness" in anthropological discourse and has critiqued the concept of discrepant temporalities; see *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object, With a New Postscript by the Author*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

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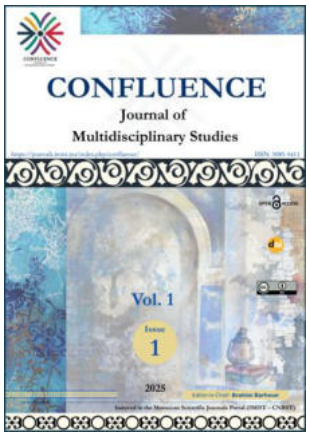
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Graphic Occupation: Joe Sacco and the Artwork of Bearing Witness

Sawsan Malla Hussein
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan
LLCIS Research Laboratory

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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

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Joe Sacco's graphic works *Palestine* (2001), *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), and *War on Gaza* (2024) as a counter-narrative to dominant media and historical discourse on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Through a peace studies framework, particularly the concepts of positive peace and moral imagination, the study situates Sacco's work as an intervention that exposes structural, cultural, and direct forms of violence. His blending of comics and investigative journalism creates layered narratives that challenge the illusion of journalistic neutrality and reclaim forgotten and overlooked past traumas. Sacco's formal techniques, like multilinear storytelling, self-reflexivity, and graphic testimony, reconstruct marginalized histories while fostering empathetic engagement. By integrating personal testimony with historical reconstruction, he not only documents episodes of mass violence and displacement but also interrogates the ideologies that sustain them. Sacco's visual medium resists the desensitization of the conflict by prompting ethical witnessing and complicating the binaries of victim and perpetrator. The article argues that Sacco's comics function as peacebuilding narratives that dismantle hegemonic discourses and promote critical literacy in an era of media saturation. His works reframe the question of objectivity, insisting on accountability and relational truth. Ultimately, Sacco's oeuvre provides a powerful model for ethically mediated storytelling, one that fosters historical awareness, transnational solidarity, and a more inclusive vision of justice.

KEYWORDS

Joe Sacco

Comics Journalism

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Testimony

Peace Studies

Introduction

Awareness of the origins and evolution of the Palestinian plight under Israeli occupation has frequently been obscured by dominant discourses that, across media, historiography, academia, and the arts, have framed the situation as an equal conflict. This framing perpetuates a misleading notion of "balance," suggesting that both sides inflict comparable levels of violence. The nearly eight decades of illegal occupation, siege, mass killing and detention, house demolitions, land confiscation, and grotesque conditions of displacement and dispossession are routinely erased behind the "war on terror" rhetoric disseminated by corporate Western media, which often promotes Israeli self-righteousness while demonizing Palestinians.

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In response to this selective historical narrative and detached reportage, numerous literary works have sought to reassert the human dimensions of the conflict by raising urgent questions concerning truth, memory, trauma, human rights, and the relationship between narrative and lived experience.[1] Among these, Joe Sacco's groundbreaking contributions to comics journalism stand out for their unique capacity to reconstruct both past and present realities in Palestine through a deeply personal and immersive artistic style.

Sacco's three major graphic works, *Palestine* (2001), *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), and *War on Gaza* (2024), combine comic art with investigative journalism and deploy the techniques of eyewitness reportage alongside graphic storytelling to document the occupation in the Palestinian Territories. *Palestine*, first published in two volumes in 1996 and later released as a single edition in 2001 with an introduction by Edward Said, draws on interviews with hundreds of Israelis and Palestinians. The main aim was to capture the lived experiences and daily struggles of Palestinians under Israeli occupation during the first intifada (1987–1993). The pages depict protests, shootings, arrests, torture, and prison conditions, all reconstructed through comic conventions grounded in testimony. *Footnotes in Gaza* excavates two largely forgotten massacres from November 1956, when Israeli forces invaded the at the time Egyptian-ruled Gaza Strip as part of the British-French intervention in the Suez Canal Crisis. Hundreds of Palestinian men were executed in the cities of Khan Younis and Rafah after being pulled from their homes, lined up, and shot. The title reflects their erasure from official history; the events are mentioned only in passing in a U.N. report. Through firsthand interviews, archival research, and visual reconstruction, Sacco retrieves these tragedies, embedding them in a wider narrative of daily resistance, struggle, and political complexity. In contrast to these two works, *War on Gaza*, which Sacco created in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 events, does not involve on-the-ground reporting, due to the barring of foreign journalists from the region. Instead, this work is Sacco's artistic commentary on what he portrays as an unfolding genocide, the complicity of Western powers—particularly the United States—and the devastating impact of sustained bombardment on Gaza. First serialized on *The Comics Journal*'s website and later published by Fantagraphics, the series consists of single-panel vignettes that reframe historical context and communicate Sacco's shock and grief as Gaza is reduced to rubble through relentless Israeli airstrikes using Western-supplied weaponry, while humanitarian aid remains obstructed.

By integrating text and image, Sacco creates layered narratives that connect formative events such as the 1948 Nakba, the 1967 war, and the 2018–2019 Great March of Return with current struggles in Gaza and the West Bank. His continuous juxtaposition of past and present serves to illuminate the complexity of Palestinian collective memory and to foster a sense of ethical responsibility grounded in a shared human condition. In his introduction to *Palestine*, Edward Said notes that, "Except one or two novelists and poets, no one has ever rendered this terrible state of affairs better than Joe Sacco" (iii). In the decades since *Palestine* won the American Book Award, Sacco has continued to expand the possibilities of historical and political graphic narrative, engaging critically with questions of trauma, memory, and representation. His works function as an intervention into Western media discourse, directly challenging superficial or misleading coverage. Although Sacco cares deeply about how the communities he documents receive his work, he writes explicitly for American and "Western European" audiences, whom he believes lack the contextual knowledge necessary to fully understand the subjects he depicts (Sacco, "Presentation").

This paper explores how Sacco's works on Palestine offer an alternative lens for interpreting the conflict by harnessing the distinctive affordances of the comics medium to convey historical memory, lived experience, and political struggle. Taken together, I argue that *Palestine*, *Footnotes in Gaza*, and *War on Gaza* constitute a powerful field for peacebuilding through

storytelling, offering a humanizing and empathetic mode of engagement that promotes a deeper understanding of the conditions necessary for positive peace.

Concepts like positive peace, as developed within peace studies, have expanded the parameters of peace theory beyond the political realist notion of peace as merely the absence of war. Johan Galtung, widely recognized as the founder of peace studies, distinguishes between negative peace, the cessation of direct violence, and positive peace, which addresses the structural and cultural underpinnings of conflict. The concept of negative peace is insufficient for understanding situations in which a stable social order is maintained through systemic oppression. In such cases, peace becomes equated with the mere suppression of open violence, while deeper forms of harm persist unaddressed (Galtung).

Violence, according to Galtung, encompasses any condition that impedes human potential or causes suffering. This includes poverty, malnutrition, repression, denial of educational opportunities, suppression of free expression, and ecological degradation. These phenomena are expressions of structural violence, as they are embedded in the social, economic, and political institutions of a society. At a deeper level, cultural violence legitimizes both direct and structural violence by producing ideological systems that generate fear, degradation, hatred, and suspicion. Cultural frameworks enable societies to normalize or justify repression, rendering structural inequality and discrimination as natural or inevitable. In contrast, positive peace is oriented toward the removal not only of direct violence, but also of the structural and cultural forces that perpetuate injustice. Its goals encompass a broad range of human concerns, including quality of life, personal development, freedom of expression, social equity, economic justice, and solidarity (Galtung).

Several peace scholars in this regard do criticize the exclusive reliability ascribed to the theoretical and the professional within the realm of peace and conflict research because it overshadows in the process alternative initiatives and practices that are conducive to the values of peace. In *Passion for Peace: Exercising Power Creatively* (2003), Stuart Rees argues that, in the presence of destructive uses of power as in wars and massive killings and other violent practices like oppression and bullying, the creative exercise of power lies in peacebuilding initiatives aimed at raising awareness about systemic injustice and imagining a world interconnected by shared ethical obligations and universal human rights. For Rees, the arts and creative writing are a source of inspiration that is strongly needed by peace researchers and conflict negotiators because they resist the rigidity of theoretical principals and enable an empathic and sensitive take on issues that might originally seem inevitable or intractable.

The criticism of the over-professionalization and departmentalization of fields of knowledge has equally been voiced by John Paul Lederach in his book *Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (2005). Reflecting on his twenty-five years of experience in mediation and peacebuilding, Lederach states: “The art has brought me closer to the discipline of touching intuition as a resource rather than considering it a distracting disturbance” (69). For Lederach, the arts are very much needed in conflict transformation because creativity helps restore the personal dimension that is most often relegated to the sphere of the subjective and improbable. Defined as “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist” (29), moral imagination is what can enable optimism inherent in creative personal processes that emanate from and address the hard realities of the human dilemmas (x).

Accordingly, the imaginative, creative and constructivist processes that emanate from personalized approaches to destructive patterns ought to be explored insofar as they are capable of breaking cycles of violence through a discourse that enables optimism in the possibility of

change. The search for peace with justice, according to these scholars, requires to be explored in any art source that inspires the creative exercise of power.

These frameworks provide a broad conceptual structure that accommodate diverse definitions of peace and offer a robust theoretical platform for analyzing Sacco's work. This paper applies a peace studies lens to Sacco's graphic works, exploring how they raise awareness of the factors that inhibit and promote peace and justice. Sacco's narratives exemplify a persistent inquiry into the causes and consequences of physical, psychological, structural, and cultural violence. This investigative process pushes readers to look beyond ideological clichés thinly veiled as objective journalism and encourages them to become more ethically attuned to the suffering of others. Within the medium of graphic narrative, Sacco's works serve as peacebuilding interventions that function as artistic tools for re-humanization, empathy, and reflection. The three works interrogate dominant conceptions of human nature and social order, offering alternative imaginaries that may help dismantle the roots of violence and foster a deeper, more inclusive understanding of the conditions required for peace.

Of particular relevance is the fact that, amidst the ongoing genocide in Gaza,[2] *Palestine* has resurged as an essential resource for readers seeking context. Following the Hamas-led October 7th incursion and the subsequent Israeli military attack on Gaza, demand for *Palestine* soared, causing initial print runs to sell out and prompting Fantagraphics to rush a new edition into publication. Critics and audiences alike suggest that this revival gives new meanings to the medium and Sacco's artwork that continue to inform contemporary discourse. In interviews, Sacco expresses sadness that his work remains, nearly thirty years later, painfully resonant today, a testament to both the durability of structural violence and the power of graphic narrative as a witness to ongoing suffering (Barnett). The renewed circulation of Sacco's works underscores their significance as critical, analytical tools that help new generations confront the moral and political complexities of genocide and reaffirm the vital role of graphic journalism in conflict awareness.

Countering the Cultural Violence of Journalism

Sacco is widely credited with establishing comics journalism as a legitimate genre of nonfiction narrative. His dual expertise as a cartoonist and a journalist enables him to navigate the formal and ethical demands of both disciplines, balancing narrative immersion with investigative rigor. When he began his first journey to the Occupied Territories in 1992 for his project *Palestine*, Sacco was disillusioned by Western media's distorted and biased portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Reflecting on his motivations, he recounts:

> I grew up thinking all Palestinians were terrorists. That was not from studying the issue closely but from absorbing what I read in newspapers. Newspapers were reporting many facts. You can report objective facts—the hijacking of an airplane, attacks on a bus, killing hostages—but often, what objective facts do not provide is a context of other crimes… You can report objective facts selectively and without context and give someone an impression, as I was given by so-called objective journalism, that Palestinians are pure and straightforward terrorists. It took self-education. I would never have come up with another viewpoint after reading the American press. (Burrows)

The fallacy of journalistic "objectivity" has been widely critiqued in media studies which expose the hegemonic influence of corporate conglomerates on global news production and discourse (Bagdikian 1983; Chomsky and Herman 1988; Schudson, Downie, and Anderson

2016; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). Media, in this framework, often becomes a vehicle for cultural violence when it justifies military aggression by delegitimizing Palestinian resistance and erasing the broader context of the occupation. Sacco's comics journalism explicitly resists these narrative erasures, urging readers to question the authority of photographic images and the ostensibly neutral language of mainstream reportage.

As Rocco Versaci notes, comics journalism—emerging in part from the ethos of New Journalism—foregrounds "anti-'official' and anticorporate" perspectives that raise a central, if frequently unasked, question: "Who creates truth, and why?" (131). While Sacco may not have been the first to use comics for nonfiction storytelling, his distinctive blend of first-person reportage from conflict zones has firmly established the form as a viable and compelling medium of journalism. Hilary Chute emphasizes this convergence, describing Sacco's work as combining "the energy and immediacy of inexpensive, accessible, serial comic books with the gravity and rigor demanded by a journalistic investigation into world-historical conflict and its effects on the ground" (*Why Comics* 448).

Mary Layoun similarly observes that Sacco's formal innovation offers a powerful means of navigating the entangled layers of political, historical, and personal meaning (315). This function becomes even more vital in a global media landscape increasingly shaped by narrative control and institutional bias. Said reinforces this view by positioning Sacco's work as a radical intervention in the field of visual culture:

> As we also live in a media-saturated world in which a huge preponderance of the world's news images are controlled and diffused by a handful of men sitting in places like London and New York, a stream of comic book images and words, assertively etched, at times grotesquely emphatic and distended to match the extreme situations they depict, provide a remarkable antidote. (iii)

Said's insight highlights how Sacco's visual storytelling contests the pretense of journalistic neutrality and disrupts the ideological circulation of dominant images. Sacco's narrative and visual strategies, such as shifting perspectives, claustrophobic panels, and non-linear layouts, invite active reader engagement. His decision to reject a stance of objectivity allows his work to foreground mediation, complicity, and interpretive uncertainty, key components of what Wendy Kozol and Kyo Maclear define as ethical witnessing (Kozol 168). For Kozol, Sacco's choice not to present violence as either pure spectacle or moral instruction is a means to resist the passivity of spectatorship. In *Palestine*, he pushes readers to reflect on the politics of looking, the limits of representation, and the ethical demands of witnessing from a position of privilege (Kozol). Through this process, Sacco constructs an alternative visual and narrative vocabulary grounded in a commitment to representing those whose stories are typically omitted from the historical and media record.

Sacco's acknowledged—even championed—subjectivity is a defining feature, articulated through his self-insertion as a character with invisible eyes behind blank glasses within the narrative. The blank spectacles suggest that Sacco is a mediator whose main task is to craft the scenes and report the events, but the glasses remain a supplement for the readers to "see" for themselves. Tristam Walker sees them as a "white screen" upon which "trauma can be projected and reconstituted," and that provides the reader with a tool for witnessing (Walker 69). Through this approach, Sacco engages readers in the investigative process itself, prompting them to confront the intersections of historical memory, present-day injustice, and the fallibility of recollection. His self-deprecation and the visible discomfort of his character subvert the power dynamics and exploitative impulses behind journalistic coverage of human rights crises. As

Richard Stafford observes, "If Sacco's image attains credibility, it is precisely because he is open about his shortcomings as a person, as a witness, and as a reporter" (Stafford). Sacco's method does not seek to provide a comprehensive history; instead, it presents fragmented personal accounts that collectively convey a textured narrative of injustice and resistance.

The opening pages of *Footnotes in Gaza* are highly revealing of Sacco's tone with regard to mainstream journalism. When he is brought by his friend Christine of Reuters to meet other foreign reporters in Jerusalem, he is portrayed as disoriented and alienated within a professional environment marked by cynicism and routine. Christine's colleagues are depicted sitting in a restaurant, casually discussing daily events amid drinks and cigarettes. Sacco describes them as "brushing off the day's dust, swirling the night's first drinks, and talking the rarified talk of the old hand and hack" (4). His criticism takes the form of an image where the restaurant's menu card is merged with images of bus bombings in Israel, assassinations and military incursions in Palestine, culminating in his sardonic observation that "they could file last month's story today—or last year's, for that matter—and who would know the difference?" (*Footnotes* 5).

Sacco takes issue with the desensitization produced by routinized media consumption in a visually saturated culture. Detached, formulaic reporting flattens the specificity of violent events, rendering them indistinguishable and stripped of context. In contrast, the images below the menu capture grief-stricken faces of Palestinian and Israeli individuals affected by violence, creating a powerful emotional counterpoint to the banality of journalistic discourse. Sacco's comic panels subvert this erasure by insisting on the affective particularity of victims. The following image of dead bodies of Palestinians fifty years ago (in reference to the 1956 massacres) next to Palestinian children killed "a week ago" and "a month ago," and an Israeli woman in an ambulance "a year ago" locates the subject matter of his book within the current events (*Footnotes* 5). The time period is marked by shadier tones, but history carries forgotten traumas that seem disturbingly similar to the current ones. In a way, this panel—and by extension, the whole book—constitutes Sacco's "answer" to the claim of irrelevance made by *Harper's Magazine* when it edited out paragraphs from an article he co-authored with journalist Chris Hedges. The omitted sections originally provided historical background on the Khan Younis massacre in a 2001 piece that chronicled the lives of Palestinians in a refugee camp (*Footnotes* ix). While history is often relegated to footnotes, Sacco shows how its echoes persist in the present. Ultimately, he does not seem to put the blame on individual journalists. Rather, he critiques the systemic forces that constrain them and positions himself as ethically responsible for reintroducing marginalized stories into public discourse.

The unique interplay of text and image in Sacco's graphic journalism enables a multilayered mode of communication that engages both cognitive and emotional registers. Such multimodality encourages critical reflection on journalistic authenticity and the mediating structures that shape public understanding. Sacco's work carries significant peacebuilding potential; it counters the systemic erasure of Palestinian subjectivity and highlights the structural and symbolic violence embedded in media narratives. Whereas Western audiences often encounter Palestinians only in moments of episodic bursts of intense violence, Sacco reveals the persistent, normalized forms of oppression that shape their everyday lives: direct violence, economic hardship, family disruption, and psychological trauma. His narratives cultivate a culture of truth-seeking, resistance, justice, empathy, and transnational solidarity. In doing so, they invite readers to reimagine global realities beyond the narrow frames imposed by corporate media and hegemonic political discourse.

Comics as Alternative History

Sacco's works occupy a unique space at the intersection of journalism and history, interrogating the assumptions and limitations of both disciplines. At the core of his artistic projects lies the challenge of navigating the tension between remembering and forgetting, between the power of historical knowledge and the apparent futility of confronting the past. His comics engage in a deliberate reconstruction of historical events, seeking to expose their complex contexts and lingering effects. For Chute, Sacco's works "ask readers to confront key epistemological questions, using the word-and image form of comics to provoke consideration of how history becomes legible as history" (*Disaster* 198). By excavating buried memories, Sacco illustrates that the cycle of violence can only be interrupted through a nuanced understanding of the past. The formal affordances of the comics medium allow him to connect present-day Palestinian realities to the buried traumas of the past. For Said, what makes Sacco "so unusual a portrayer of life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is that his true concern is finally history's victims" (v). His works enact a process of "never forgetting," not merely by preserving memory but by revealing how memory itself is constructed.

The comics form enhances the emotional and analytical impact of these memories by allowing for the juxtaposition of past and present within single frames or across sequential panels. For Chute, along with Sacco's self-consciously interpretive comics, there is a confidence in the medium's "ability to traffic in expressing history," asserting that, "taking for granted that "pure" historical representation is never possible, comics calls into question the status of any "objective" or "realistic" account, including historiographies— especially those that bank on the seeming transparency of words" (*Disaster* 198-199). In *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza*, Sacco frequently overlays contemporary interviews with reconstructed scenes from the past, visually dramatizing the way historical violence persists into the present. In *War on Gaza*, the formal clarity of Sacco's stark black-and-white illustrations intensifies the affective charge of the images, underscoring the rawness of lived pain and historical recurrence. Together, these works function as counter-histories, amplifying voices routinely excluded from dominant discourses in Western media and historiography. As Sacco puts it, "One advantage of comic journalism is that I can depict the past... History can make you realize that the present is just one layer of a story. What seems to be the immediate and vital story now will one day be another layer in this geology of bummers" (Gilson).

Footnotes in Gaza, in particular, constitutes not only a chronicle of past atrocities but also a meditation on the persistence of trauma and the epistemological challenges of accessing historical truth. The volume's richly documented and contextually layered reconstruction attempts to salvage two massacres, largely forgotten beyond the immediate memory of survivors, and reinscribe them through the graphic medium. Sacco engages in meticulous investigative journalism: identifying and interviewing witnesses, verifying accounts, and correcting inconsistencies caused by memory decay. He juxtaposes quotations with carefully researched illustrations, often based on archival photographs, to preserve visual and factual integrity.

Sacco situates the 1956 massacres within the continuum of dispossession, linking them to ongoing house demolitions and the siege on Gaza, thereby stressing the continuity between past violence and contemporary suffering. During his stay in the region, Sacco witnessed a continuous thread of bitterness as the region goes from one disaster to another. He writes in his foreword: "'events are continuous [as someone in Gaza told me].' Palestinians never seem to have the luxury of digesting one tragedy before the next one is upon them." Moreover, delving into the tragedies of the past is mocked by Gazans for perceived futility as they ask Sacco why

he is digging into the past when much more terrible atrocities are taking place; Israelis bulldoze entire neighborhoods, carry out targeted assassinations and disappear men in nightly raids of homes (*Footnotes* xi). A key rationale of the work is striking this uneasy balance between history and forgetting, between the power of knowing and the futility of the past. At its best, weaving the memories and evidence of the past into the present is an attempt to reveal the relevance and meaningfulness of events in the midst of the cycle of violence because, as he argues, they "often contain the seeds of the grief and anger that shape present-day events" (xi). This point is reinforced by one of Sacco's interviewees, Hamas senior official Abed El-Aziz El-Rantisi (later assassinated by Israel), who recounts witnessing at the age of nine his uncle being killed. The trauma remained with him for years: "This sort of action can never be forgotten," he tells Sacco. "They planted hatred in our hearts" (xi).

In the chapter entitled "Footnotes", Sacco foregrounds the historically peripheral nature of his work through a tripartite visual structure that moves from geopolitical narrative to local conflict, and finally to the human cost of war: "This is the story of footnotes to a sideshow of a forgotten war." The top splash panel depicts a war-ravaged cityscape during the 1956 Suez Crisis, with soldiers advancing through rubble and warplanes flying overhead, contextualizing the scene within the alliance of Britain, France, and Israel against Egypt. However, Sacco immediately reframes this conflict as merely the backdrop to "a sideshow" that invokes the ongoing raids between Palestinian fedayeen and Israeli forces that remained largely absent from dominant historical accounts. The "footnote panel"—strategically positioned at the bottom of the page—foregrounds the human impact of this "sideshow": A group of Palestinian men with raised hands walk toward the viewer, seemingly under arrest or being held at gunpoint, their expressions marked by terror and despair, some already shot, others awaiting execution (8). Sacco's expressionistic figures and use of direct gaze demand the viewer not look away.

The visual configuration powerfully engages the reader on an emotional level. The image of the refugees' arms up in surrender and frozen faces, the elderly man in the front with terrified eyes, and the one behind him with his head up, cringing and eyes tightly closed, unable to look at the next bullet that could end his life as it has just done with the man under his feet evokes a visceral response. As Martha Nussbaum observes, such a narrative "focuses the mind too insistently on particulars, seeing them as important not just as parts of the causal nexus of the universe, but in their own right" (Nussbaum 510). Sacco's visual storytelling thus becomes a medium for fostering empathetic engagement by humanizing victims otherwise silenced by history. In doing so, he subverts the marginalization of these events which have been relegated "to the bottom of history's pages, where they barely hang on" (*Footnotes* 8). The painstakingly detailed recreation of the survivors' accounts represent what Chute describes as "visual and verbal counterarchives to official histories" (*Disaster* 205).

In *Footnotes in Gaza* the past is not clearly differentiated and meshes more seamlessly with the present and, unlike film's forward-marching momentum, the transitions between 2002–2003 and 1956 are seamless. One of the most striking examples comes at the climax of the Khan Younis killings when eyewitness Faris Barbakh who was then fourteen ventured to go out in the curfew to find out a line of dozens of corpses of the men that were pulled from their homes, piled along the wall of a castle. Sacco offers side-by-side illustration. The left page is a panoramic view of bodies "from the beginning of the wall to the end," piled against "the ruins of the 14th century castle, which now forms one side of the town square." The facing page features the same castle half a century later. Its walls are festooned with handbills and graffiti and cars in a crowded row where the bodies once had been. The effect is haunting (*Footnotes* 98-99). These two panels are meant to be mirrors of one another. They bear a compositional symmetry; yet, the details differ markedly. The comics medium allows the reader to stay on the pages, make the visual transition repeatedly in both directions, read Faris's words and Sacco's reflections, and contemplate the shift. One can read these two panels as a simple segue from

past to present, but the pointed parallel and contrast in the details suggest that they cannot be easily reconciled.

A defining characteristic of Sacco's testimonial art is the individualized depiction of people in mass scenes. An excellent example from *Footnotes in Gaza* is the two-page spread of the chapter entitled "The Screening." When Rafah fell under occupation, Israeli forces ordered all men aged fifteen to sixty to gather in the government schoolyard where they were brutally screened for fedayeen and for Palestinian soldiers in the Egyptian army. Herded through gunfire, beaten with clubs and metal rods, the men who survived the passage were forced to kneel in the schoolyard—wounded, bleeding, and humiliated—while soldiers fired automatic weapons overhead, denying them food, water, or access to toilets. In this rendering of the eight-or-ten-hour-long sifting of the detained men in the schoolyard, the effort that drawing such an evocative scene involves is quite remarkable. The engulfing mood is one of dread, pain and desolation. Still, Sacco makes the laborious effort to draw each Palestinian man with a distinctive countenance. There is an apparent visual simplicity coupled with emotional and political complexity. The attention attributed to the individualized portrayal provides intimate detail about the characters, which enables identification with distant others. In addition, this borderless splash emphasizes both the magnitude of the gathering and the extent of the duration, which speaks to the absence of this chapter from the history of the conflict (*Footnotes* 298-299).

In *Palestine*, many of the stories focus on Palestinians recalling past traumas: mothers mourning children, former prisoners recounting torture, or families remembering the destruction of homes. Sacco renders refugee camps, military checkpoints, and demolished neighborhoods with meticulous detail, lending visual credibility and narrative weight to their experiences. The perspectives in his panels, for instance, can be exaggeratedly overcrowded and cramped to reflect confinement and restriction in refugee camps. The visuals make a distant place, both geographically and culturally, feel strikingly close and tangible, offering viewers a seemingly effortless path to identification and connection, or what Scott McCloud terms "amplification through simplification" (30). However, while Sacco's self-representation is usually marked by a tone of sarcasm, awkwardness, or detachment, a reminder of the inherently flawed but persistent investigative process, the laborious illustration of his subjects' testimonies forges a rhetorically intricate connection between subject, author, and reader.

For instance, during a testimony about a settler attack, Sacco juxtaposes the family's account with a close-up image of settlers from a low angle of view that emphasizes their mouths, storming a Palestinian village, firing guns into the air, and smashing houses' windows with rocks and axes. The terrified expressions of the elderly grandmother who nearly suffers a heart attack, and the grief-stricken father who watches his son bleed to death due to curfew restrictions that prevent ambulance access, offer one of Sacco's most powerful unspoken appeals for justice and solidarity (fig.1, fig.2). [3] Gilbert Cruz observes that, "The hopelessness etched across the faces of Sacco's war-weary Palestinians would be near impossible to duplicate solely through the written word" (32).

By placing such scenes alongside those of the settlers' violence, Sacco reclaims the humanity often effaced in mainstream representations, interrupting the sanitized detachment with which such narratives are typically rendered. Such representations deepen Lederach's understanding of the arts as integral to conflict transformation insofar as they cultivate the moral imagination necessary to grapple with the layered textures of human pain and possibility. On the other hand, without the political context that opens this chapter of land confiscation as a systematic policy of consecutive Israeli governments for settlement expansion, these acts can easily be reduced, as they usually are in Western discourse, to two sides fighting each other over a piece of land. Settler violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, documented widely by organizations such as the United Nations, Amnesty International, and B'Tselem, has intensified since the 1980s and escalated further in late 2022 (United Nations, *A/78/553*; Amnesty International,

Settlements and International Law; Amnesty International, *State-Backed Rampage*; B'Tselem), following the election of far-right leaders linked to the settlement movement. Sacco's narrative insistence on showing the victims of this violence brings to light the entrenched structures that sustain injustice. The intimate, emotionally resonant portrayals of these individuals offer insights that statistical, policy-driven reports might overlook.

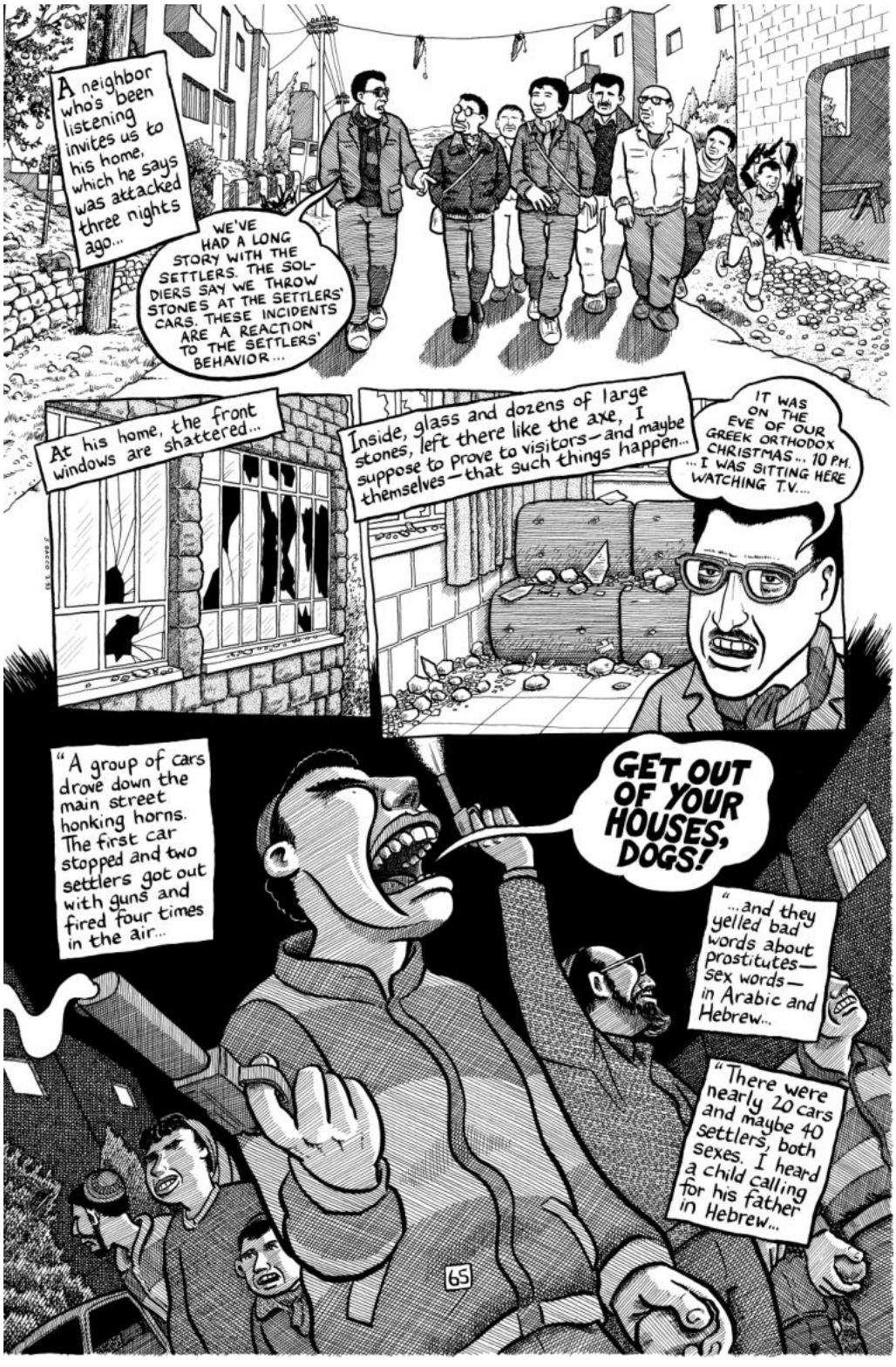


Fig. 1. Joe Sacco, *Palestine*, p. 65.



Fig. 2. Joe Sacco, *Palestine*, p. 70.

Similarly, in *Footnotes in Gaza*, Sacco uses the figure of his guide, Abed, and his family to convey the historical, journalistic, logistical, and socio-economic context necessary for understanding how the contemporary condition of Palestinian refugees is rooted in overlooked historical episodes. Their testimonies reflect the long-term erosion of opportunities for a dignified life following the establishment of the State of Israel and the subsequent mass displacement. Sacco cites a 1949 Israeli Foreign Ministry report that chillingly stated: "The most adaptable and best survivors would manage by a process of natural selection, and the others will waste away. Some will die, but most will turn into human debris and social outcasts and probably join the poorest classes in the Arab countries" (36). Underlying such tellingly dehumanizing rhetoric is a logic by which the fate of more than half of Palestine's indigenous population who had been uprooted from their homes was envisaged.

In seeking to bear witness to the injustices endured by Palestinians, a notable aspect of Sacco's work is his refusal to idealize victims or demonize perpetrators. In *Palestine*, Palestinian teenagers are frequently portrayed as aggressive, harassing Sacco for money or shooting at birds' nests (*Palestine* 21-24). In *Footnotes in Gaza*, readers learn that many fedayeen were formerly thieves or criminals, recruited by Egyptian intelligence officer Mustafa Hafez. Sacco's depiction of an aged fedayee commander recounting an operation where fedayeen killed Israeli soldiers, only to carry out further killings, and sever ears as proof, reflects his commitment to documenting violence irrespective of who commits it. The inclusion of such graphic imagery serves not to sensationalize but to challenge the moral justification of brutality, even when enacted by the oppressed.

Sacco's refusal to romanticize is further exemplified in his attention to the suffering of innocent civilians. One panel shows a close-up of two Israeli children lying lifeless, bloodied on the ground (72-73). The focus on their youthful, delicate faces invites the reader to imagine the profound tragedy of their deaths, children who could have been anyone's. Despite the devastating consequences inflicted on Palestinian refugees by Israeli forces, Sacco resists the fatalistic logic that legitimizes violence as inevitable. Instead, he emphasizes the shared human cost borne by civilians on all sides.

The Artwork of Bearing Witness

Unlike traditional war reporting, Sacco is not in search of a breaking news moment or a sensational headline; rather, his panels in *Palestine* and in *Footnotes in Gaza* unfold with a deliberate slowness that mirrors his own process of discovery. It allows him to meticulously reflect on the state of daily life under occupation—the streets, the infrastructure, the gestures of endurance. The power of his narrative lies not in spectacle, but in the accumulation of ordinary degradations that lead up to what he conceives of as "attacks on people's dignity" (Mohtasham). The visual documentation of crumbling pavements, sewage-filled streets, and dilapidated housing in Gaza evokes Galtung's concept of structural violence. These conditions are not the result of direct assault but of enduring inequalities embedded in social and political structures. Veena Das emphasizes that violence does not always explode; it often seeps silently into the everyday (Das 7). The self-deprecation and sarcasm usually displayed by Sacco's character, in a way, grant agency to the reader as they navigate stark splashes and frameless panels of muddy, flooded streets in a refugee camp (*Palestine* 147, 150, 163) or streets full of bulldozed houses in Rafah (*Footnotes* 180-81). Beyond dramatizing violence, these scenes reveal and equally subvert how it is normalized through neglect, confinement, and dispossession.

Accordingly, the visual-narrative method positions *Footnotes in Gaza*, *Palestine* and *War on Gaza* as ethical endeavors to creatively reinscribe erased or overlooked histories. In his interviews, Sacco embeds each of his subjects in the foreground of the panel as a head-and-

shoulders mugshot, rendered just cartoony enough to be familiar—someone the reader might know personally—speaking directly to the audience (for example 236). These portraits personalize the testimony and extend the emotional stakes of bearing witness. The raw scenes would risk becoming indistinguishable from amateur atrocity footage were it not for Sacco's humanizing lens. The graphic portrayal of wounded and deceased bodies compels readers to confront the corporeal toll of violence and to recognize the individuals, families, and communities devastated by it.

Sacco constructs a narrative that transcends the verbal testimony of his interviewees, drawing equally on their visual perception to achieve an honest representation of events. His narrative strategy relies on a complex, multilinear organizational logic, employing multiple sign systems, stylistic conventions, and rhetorical techniques. In the chapter entitled "Nov. 3 1956. Pt.1: Khan Younis Center" of *Footnotes in Gaza*, for instance, the panel structure depicting survivor Misbah Abu Sadouni's harrowing account of the Khan Younis massacre is meticulously composed to foreground subjectivity and embodied experience. The top borderless panel, dominated by the width of heavy Bren machine guns, illustrates Misbah's account that they "fired four different times." The Israeli soldiers appear as indistinct extensions of the weaponry, with their covered eyes emphasizing their dehumanization and symbolizing their inability—or refusal—to recognize the humanity of the Palestinians they are firing upon. In contrast, the lower panel centers Misbah's wide, zoomed-in eyes, accentuating the intensity of his perception as he witnesses bullets exploding skulls and faces and experiences a sensation of his spirit ascending. An aerial view of bloodied bodies strewn across the ground visually aligns the reader with Misbah's disembodied perspective. The superimposition of horizontal panels over vertical ones serves a narratological function, transcending the "photographic moment" to guide the viewer's interpretation of the visual field (90).

In fact, if Sacco suggests that drawing is an "act of visualization" that "comes with an unavoidable measure of refraction" (*Footnotes* x), then that refraction can serve to focus the reader's understanding. Such instances of graphic testimony expose the entrenched structures of exclusion and racialized hierarchy shaping Israeli state policy and settler-colonial practices. In *War on Gaza*, Sacco particularly interrogates the contradictions inherent in upholding Western discourses of democracy by Israel through two juxtaposed panels: one shows Israeli citizens protesting Prime Minister Netanyahu's judicial reforms, while the other depicts armed settlers attacking Palestinian villagers harvesting olives under the protection of IDF soldiers (*War* 28-29). Beneath the surface of settler violence lies a system in which democratic ideals and human rights are selectively granted to the Jewish population, rendering violence against Palestinians both normalized and institutionally sanctioned.

Sacco does not shield himself from the critique he levels at liberal democratic hypocrisy. In fact, in *War on Gaza*, Sacco opens on a reflective note as he revisits an earlier conversation with a Gazan friend in which he suggested that Palestinians "ought to march peacefully to the Israeli barrier enclosing Gaza so the world would laud their non-violence and shame the Israelis into ending their oppression." The friend responded, incredulously, that the Israelis would undoubtedly shoot them. The exchange is rendered through exaggerated close-ups of Sacco's face and raised finger, visually ridiculing his own moral posturing as he is lecturing his friend from a position of Western privilege. However, the caption that displays Sacco's solution is strategically placed on images from the 2018–2019 Great March of Return, during which Gazans were, in fact, peacefully demonstrating the occupation and the blockade, only to be met with lethal force. By juxtaposing his earlier idealism with the brutal reality of peaceful protest met by sniper fire, Sacco critiques the inadequacy of liberal prescriptions from Western observers who fail to grasp the structures of impunity at play (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Joe Sacco, *War on Gaza*, p 1.



Fig. 4. Joe Sacco, *War on Gaza*, p 2.

The power of Sacco's empathetic representation lies in the multi-layered meanings his comics generate. A central scene from the Great March of Return depicts Gazans protesting along the fence that separates the besieged Gaza Strip, carrying banners and flags. Drawn from a relative distance, this composition allows the reader to grasp both the scale of the fortified barrier that enforces the blockade and to assess whether such a moment might resemble "a page … from Gandhi's book" (1). The visual framing invites critical reflection on concepts of nonviolence and peace with justice, themes deeply embedded in peace research and here evoked through individualized, affective renderings.

The subsequent page shifts the perspective to ground level, depicting demonstrators "demanding their rights as stipulated by long-ignored U.N. resolutions," only to be met with live fire as Sacco's friend had bleakly predicted (fig. 4). A caption that references Amnesty International's report on Israeli snipers deliberately aiming for limbs during the protests in order to "'inflict life-changing injuries'—i.e., amputations" accompanies a chaotic scene: wounded protesters lie on the ground, one is carried in another's arms, and a journalist has just been shot in the head. The lower section of the panel is a visually arresting sequence composed entirely of fragmented and repeated frames of lower limbs viewed through the crosshairs of a rifle scope. These limbs—mostly legs—are isolated, decontextualized from the rest of the body, and rendered with a brutal clinical focus. This layout resists a conventional linear sequence, instead functioning as a visual accumulation of violence, both repetitive and systematic. The repetition of body parts framed as targets communicates the mechanized nature of the injuries and the depersonalization of the victims. The overall composition suggests a crescendo of trauma, one that overwhelms narrative clarity and instead communicates a haunting calculated rhythm of destruction. What distinguishes *War on Gaza* as a work committed to justice is Sacco's artistic reconstruction of scenes that could—and arguably should—serve as evidence in cases involving war crimes and crimes against humanity. Yet these images, like the real-world events they depict, are largely ignored, as, Sacco remarks sardonically, "the world yawned and moved on" (2).

The sequence on the Great March of Return culminates in one of the most haunting and symbolic panels of the book, also featured on its cover. Black bombs fall from the sky, each entering the form of a white-shrouded corpse laid out on the ground. A fragmented caption asks, "Is it genocide, or is it self-defense?" a question that critiques Western preoccupations with terminology and rhetorical precision in the face of unrelenting violence. Sacco's pointed response is spread across three captions: "Let us make everyone happy and say it is both;" "In that case, we'll need a new terminology;" and finally, "I propose 'genocidal self-defense'" (fig. 5). Through this linguistic provocation, Sacco underscores the absurdity of language debates that obscure the lived realities of Gazans, both living and dead, beneath falling bombs.

Building on his critique of rhetorical deflection, Sacco pivots from international discourse to personal implication, turning his gaze toward the United States and its material support for Israel's war machine. In the sequence spanning pages 15 to 24, Sacco depicts himself as both a narrator and a participant in the violence, conjuring a surreal sequence in which his own body and tax payments are metaphorically processed into the weapons and technologies used by the Israeli military. This is no abstract metaphor: tanks, drones, and bombs are all visually linked to U.S. funding, and Sacco does not exclude himself from the equation. Through his act of visual self-indictment, there is a direct challenge to the illusion of ethical detachment, which resonates with Lederach's moral imagination as the capacity to recognize and engage the complex interdependencies that sustain violence. These panels do not simply accuse the U.S. government of enabling war crimes; they confront the reader with the ethical burden of democratic participation in empire. This is where Sacco's work is most urgent: it reveals the necessity of understanding complicity as structured, material, and actionable. His visual rhetoric turns witnessing into an act of reckoning.

By making visible these interdependencies, *War on Gaza* contributes to the discourse of justice and accountability. Sacco's panels resist the depoliticized humanitarian narrative that often frames Gaza solely in terms of victimhood and suffering. Instead, he interrogates the international structures, political, economic, or ideological, that enable this suffering, particularly the role of Western democracies that claim to uphold peace while underwriting war. His satire, especially the phrase "genocidal self-defense," is not merely provocative, it is a call to strip away euphemism and confront the contradictions of global power. For peace and conflict studies, Sacco's work becomes a visual pedagogy of structural violence and ethical responsibility. It asks: how do wars persist not only through tanks and bombs, but through discourse, denial, and distant spectatorship? In making these mechanisms visible, and implicating himself in them, Sacco transforms the comic medium into a tool for critical inquiry, and into a space where the pursuit of peace must begin with the recognition of one's place in the system of violence.

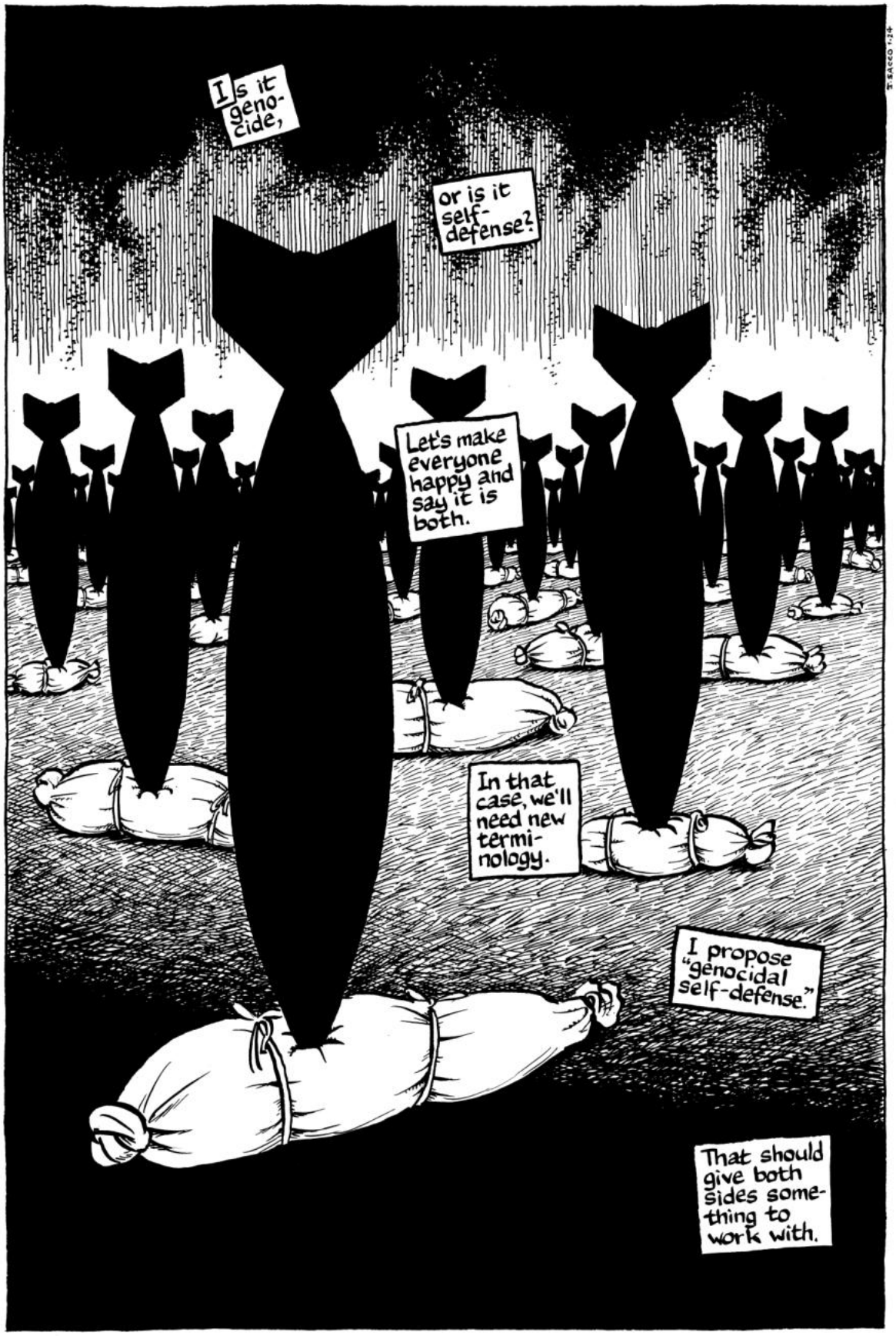


Fig. 5. Joe Sacco, *War on Gaza*, p 3.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Sacco's artistic commitment to documenting the lived experiences of Palestinians through the medium of comics journalism generates powerful effects of identification, empathy, and moral engagement. His integration of eyewitness testimony, historical excavation, and visual narrative resists dominant media narratives that render Palestinian suffering invisible or abstract. In doing so, *Palestine*, *Footnotes in Gaza*, and *War on Gaza* align with peace studies' critical commitment to exposing the structural, cultural, and direct forms of violence that inhibit justice and understanding.

Through an interdisciplinary fusion of journalism, art, and memory work, Sacco crafts a counter-archive, one that values the overlooked, the footnoted, the silenced. He shifts the act of witnessing away from detached objectivity and toward a participatory and accountable position, where truth is relational and grounded in the experience of those whose lives are most impacted by violence. His self-representation challenges the myth of journalistic neutrality and models a form of ethical witnessing that foregrounds humility, self-reflection, and solidarity.

From a peace studies perspective, Sacco's works serve as a vital intervention: they confront the erasure of Palestinian subjectivity and reinscribe the narratives of victims into the historical record. His detailed renderings of individuals refuse simplistic binaries and instead push readers to grapple with the human cost of violence. The concept of positive peace, as theorized by Johan Galtung, finds resonance in Sacco's work: the dismantling of structural and cultural violence becomes possible only through the cultivation of empathy, historical consciousness, and visual truth-telling.

Moreover, in an era of media saturation and disinformation, Sacco's graphic journalism offers an alternative mode of knowledge production, one that is affective, critical, and resistant. The interplay of word and image slows down the consumption of information, inviting the reader into a space of contemplation rather than passive reception. By challenging the visual and discursive control exerted by global media conglomerates, Sacco reclaims a visual narrative that promotes peace, justice, and human dignity.

In the privacy of the creative mind, in the unofficial yet powerful medium of literary and visual expression, Sacco's works are acts of imaginative solidarity. They refuse silence, challenge indifference, and ultimately enrich public understanding of Palestine through a quiet, persistent insistence on the humanity of the unseen. If, as Said reminds us, we must attend to the footnotes of history to grasp its full weight, Sacco's art, thus, serves as a compelling model for ethical, visually mediated storytelling that invites critical reflection on silenced histories.

Notes

1. Some examples of literary works are: Alan Rickman and Katharyn Viner's *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* (2005); Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (1998); Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1963) and *Returning to Haifa* (1969); Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* (1976); Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) and *Against the Loveless World* (2020), William A. Cook's *The Chronicles of Nefaria* (2008).

2. The term genocide here is not used for rhetorical exaggeration; it aligns with international jurisprudence as evidenced by the ICJ's provisional orders and recognizes consensus in

genocide studies from scholars like Amos Goldberg to academic coalitions. (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Statement by UN Experts: Grave Violations Committed by Israel May Amount to War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, 16 Nov. 2023, www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/statement-un-experts-grave-violations-committed-israel-may-amount-war; Genocide Scholars, "Statement by 55 Holocaust and Genocide Studies Scholars on the Situation in Israel and Palestine," Genocide Studies and Prevention, 17 Oct. 2023, www.genocidestudiesandprevention.org/article/id/1293; International Association of Genocide Scholars, Statement on Gaza, 2024, www.genocidescholars.org/statements; Francesca Albanese, Report to the UN Human Rights Council on the Situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Mar. 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/documents/reports; Genocide Watch, Genocide Emergency: Gaza, 2023, www.genocidewatch.com/gaza; Human Rights Watch, Israel: Apparent War Crimes in Gaza, 8 Dec. 2023, www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/08/israel-apparent-war-crimes-gaza)

3. All illustrations by Joe Sacco are reproduced with permission. *Palestine* (Fantagraphics Books, 2001) and *War on Gaza* (Fantagraphics Books, 2024). Copyright © Joe Sacco. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books (www.fantagraphics.com).

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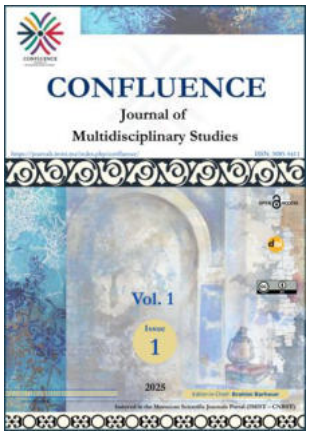
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Performance Knowledge and Practices Beyond Dominant Discourses and Geographies: Glimpses from *Crossing the Lines*

Rajae Khaloufi
King Fahd School of Translation, Tangier, Morocco.

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Rajae Khaloufi is an Associate Professor at King Fahd School of Translation in Tangier-Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tetouan, Morocco. Her main areas of interest include Translation Studies, Literary Translation and Performance Studies**.**

r.khaloufi@uae.ac.ma

https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6624-3019

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Performance Knowledge and Practices Beyond Dominant Discourses and Geographies: Glimpses from *Crossing the Lines*

Rajae Khaloufi
King Fahd School of Translation, Tangier, Morocco.

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the post-war Bosnian production *Crossing the Lines*, while exploring the complexities and functions of performance as an efficient means of artistic creativity, political resistance and collective healing. Based on multidisciplinary theories primarily from performance studies and trauma theory, the analysis aims to demonstrate how engaged theater can restructure power dynamics, facilitating individual and communal psychosocial recovery. To illustrate this capacity for performance art, the work centers on *Crossing the Lines*, a collaborative performance project presented by Dah Theater and Women in Black. The study exemplifies how the performance artistically blends testimonial stories, embodied enactment, and public intervention to confront wartime violence and its aftermath. Grounded in relevant theories, the analysis reveals how activist performances perceive audiences' presence as active intervention, whether through direct involvement or silence. This mechanism is demonstrated through *Crossing the Lines*, which shows how the performance engages its spectators and strengthens the bonds across previously divided communities. Such performances attempt to establish connections and dismantle dominant historical narratives by employing three techniques identified throughout the analysis: trauma reenactment through symbolic sounds, gestures, and collective engagement; artistic methods based on Brechtian techniques and postmodern collage; and the strategic use of public spheres to facilitate broader participation. The study argues that performances like *Crossing the Lines* stimulate the emergence of knowledge that confronts systematized oppression and provide meaningful grounds for post-war recovery, negotiating the intersection of collective memory, trauma, and socio-political change.

KEYWORDS

Performance Art

Applied Theater

Trauma Healing

Collective Memory

Social Justice

Resistance

Introduction: Performance as Political and Therapeutic Intervention

Through various verbal and non-verbal channels, performance addresses diverse human issues associated with social or political reality, while being detached from geographical confines and transcending the idiosyncratic boundaries of performances. In this sense, performance addresses the collective awareness of worldwide audiences in order to draw their attention to specific universal social or political ills, hence making the world a huge stage. Through satire, symbolism or more direct criticism of such conflicting contexts, today's performances can go beyond those spaces, often devoted to the elite to turn performative

Contact ✉ r.khaloufi@uae.ac.ma
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practices into patterns of knowledge that revolutionize the very hierarchies of the subject matter of theatrical knowledge.

Performances that used to be in certain temporal and geographical spaces de-politicized abiding by the dictates of the master-puppeteers and censored whenever viewed as endangering the image and existence of the dominant discourses have shifted into new paradigms in the geographies of knowledge, bringing about new modes of being and doing. Hence, new performance studies and practices might play a vital role in transforming the political scene in a number of contexts, especially those where master narratives and political censorship dominate.

Performances contingent upon such conflicting contexts will be addressed in this paper, aiming to clarify the gaps, struggles, and interconnections between the actual dominant powers and the politicized dramatic discourse. This might be effectively achieved and concretized through illustrations derived from a performance titled *Crossing the Lines*, produced in the wake of the Bosnian war, as its content and performative aspects challenge the atrocities of political control, conflict, and displacement. Such performance-audience dynamics might contribute to reducing trauma effects on the civilian victims, as well as improving performance knowledge, one that can remap the old hierarchies of power and hegemony to give room to new freer performance studies and practices.

Theoretical Framework: Performance at the Intersection of Politics and Trauma

The analysis of *Crossing the Lines* draws on performance studies, trauma theory, and applied theater frameworks to explore how the performance operates as both a political intervention and a healing practice. Rădulescu's (95) research on war theater demonstrates the therapeutic power of drama, while Rancière's (*The Emancipated* 13) spectator theory illuminates the dynamics between audience and performers. More recent contributions from Conti (9) on trauma's social dimensions and Harme's (9) embodied drama therapy approaches, enhanced with Sajnani and Johnson's (4) trauma-informed approaches and Sarul's theatrical trauma processing, further enrich the analysis of the' role of performances in post-conflict healing. These intersecting perspectives provide an efficient framework for analyzing this Bosnian postwar performance, synthesizing testimony, activism, and ritual healing.

Drama in Contexts of Conflict

Drama as Social Commentary

Building upon the previous ideas, one might assume that the transformative potential of performance art extends beyond merely portraying societal concerns to actively rewriting the discourses embedded within them. As they attempt to engage audiences in intuitive, realistic narratives that resonate with their lives and existence, such performances evidently trigger emotional involvement and active reflection, thereby prompting viewers to question their own roles within contemporary social realities. This embedding of innovative performances within their social contexts is deepened by introducing techniques that revolutionize the interrelations between drama and therapy.

This idea is emphasized by Sanjnani and Johnson, who consider that "the field of drama therapy is in the process of re-examining its basic principles and reorienting itself to pressing issues related to social justice, for there can be no healing without some form of justice" (21). This implies that embedment within social contexts endows performances with potential healing abilities capable of reaching broad social groups. Hence, innovative forms of drama, integrating multimedia elements for instance, further boost the convenience and influence of these performances, clearing the way for a broader engagement among diverse groups of audiences who may not habitually frequent theatrical spaces.

This democratization of performance art calls upon collaboration that extends beyond the field of performance studies, to encompass various cultures and relevant disciplines, thus the emergence of a rich landscape of voices and perspectives confronting power narratives. Accordingly, performances like *Crossing the Lines* do not simply address existing injustices: they serve as stimulus for dialogue and action, stirring up engagement among communities, while uncovering systemic issues at both micro and macro levels. This paves the way for building a conduit for healing and resistance through the interplay of art and activism, a space where marginalized stories can arise.

Such engaging contemporary performance practices not only expose the interdependencies and defects of social and political realities but also operate as active props for rethinking the prospective routes of societies entrapped within conflict and oppression. Through their engaging character, such performances allow audiences to cultivate a deep comprehension of their interconnectedness and collective responsibility towards their societies. This dynamic interplay would enable them to advocate for change, hence the transformation of performance arts into spaces for exploration and mediums for resistance against injustices.

Drama in this sense becomes a therapeutic means that allows viewers and performers alike to represent and speak of experiences they used to ignore, through non-verbal techniques such as gesture, sound, and movement (Harmer 9). This implies that drama, through various channels, including language, gestures, music, and other forms of communication, addresses diverse human inter-geographical and multicultural issues relating to social or political reality. It is a form of written art, generally intended to be performed before an audience that is engaged in the subject matter of the work in question. In this manner, drama engages collective audiences' awareness to spotlight specific social or political issues, thus relegating to the background political and geographical constraints. Satire, symbolism, or more direct criticism of such challenges is used by playwrights to involve the audience in the various facets of performances or even to urge them indirectly to act against certain dominating powers.

Applied Theater in Oppressive Regimes

Performance as Transformative Social Justice

Drama frequently serves as a subtle yet transformative force within societies dominated by oppressive power structures, especially those under authoritarian regimes that enforce rigid master narratives. In such contexts, theatrical practice is undermined by certain restrictive measures, from political censorship to direct persecution of artists and writers, that fundamentally control artistic expression.

These limitations often lead to pushing innovative performances to peripheral situations, where coded resistance discourses might flourish. Such oppressive conditions might also prompt artistic exile, as creators evidently seek environments where they can express their experiences without fear of retaliation. Through these dynamics, theatrical expression appears to be substantially associated with broader democratic struggles.

Equally, the role of performance increases in contexts of war and forced displacement, where it functions both as a form of post-trauma survival mechanism and a means of potential political change. In this way, post-trauma performances evolve from individual catharsis into influential sociopolitical critique. Within such unstable political environments, the synthesis of psychological and physical suffering infiltrates and tests the natural human abilities to resist and survive traumatic situations as suggested by Conti (9). This combination of trauma, pain and innate resilience drives victims of traumatic events toward artistic expression, a process that might lead to innovation and transformation, both artistically and politically.

Historical Foundations

Theater as Social Mirror

The multifunctional nature of performance art has deep roots in theater's earliest manifestations, which sought to reconcile human experience with artistic expression. Ancient theater was focused on depicting daily human activities while attempting to uncover the aesthetic aspects prevailing in particular historical periods. Theater was, hence, focused on music, dance, singing, hymns, poetry, and other visual or acoustic arts. The content of the shows included, mainly, ritual tribal performances, historical tragedies, storytelling, dramatic dance, and entertaining performances (Al-Janabi); ("A Short History of Ancient Theatre").

As theater became more and more focused on stage performances, it developed gradually into artistic forms premised on language and/or gestures, besides a deeper content expressing specific attitudes towards social, economic, and/or political phenomena. Theater has evolved into various forms of performances imitating social reality, hence its function as a prism through which human behavior of all kinds and dimensions can be visualized and/or denigrated. Theater, in this sense, is a mirror of human life that extends beyond mere reflection of human phenomena and popular or ritualized forms of entertainment to immerse the receivers within the different facets of their society.

Performance and performance studies might be, in this way, a means of reshaping audiences' collective consciousness by depicting and criticizing reality and providing them with a conceptual view of the psychological relationships linking them to their social reality. In other words, performance is an important means that shapes the way people behave towards the vital issues of their nations (Al-Janabi). This equally implies that people's interaction with the geographies of knowledge, as well as their perceptions of their surrounding conditions, are all shaped by historical, geographical, cultural and political factors, reflected in certain ways through performance.

It is this dynamic interplay between individuals, their surrounding contexts and performance art that enables the destabilization of the established conventional links between performance and the mechanisms of political control and manipulation. Along these lines, theatrical practice evolves into a more autonomous and self-determined form of performance, paving the way for the emergence of greater artistic creativity and freer societies.

Creative Performance and Challenging Oppression

Performance and performance studies actively challenge colonial discourse and other (dis)informing powers by rendering their mechanisms visible. Through writing, acting, or staging, drama practitioners employ both technical innovation and artistic creativity to steer the receivers away from passive spectatorship, enabling them to criticize dominant narratives and perceive new paradigm shifts in the geographies of knowledge. This transformative potential

necessitates that artists, writers and researchers echo these insights through performance in ways that align with the perceptions and aspirations of local communities, paving the way for fostering dialogue and structural change. Such effective creative performative practice could be feasible only if the participants in the realm of performance arts, namely playwrights, producers, directors, actors, etc., are deeply aware of their society's specific tensions (Al-Janabi). This approach can prevent performance from becoming either abstract didacticism or trivial spectacle.

In this regard, performances, while maintaining their artistic essence, must reflect and criticize political, social, and economic realities. They transcend mere sociological analysis through their inherent entertaining quality. This suggests that efficient theatrical productions should rely on a balanced combination of real events and artistic creativity. This duality makes theater a unique channel, refracting reality through an artistic prism without being restricted to didacticism. Such productions achieve a careful balance between factual grounding and creative interpretation. Blending these two facets enables theatrical works to avoid two pitfalls: irrelevance from over-prioritizing entertainment, or disengagement from excessive reliance on overt political comments. This equilibrium is often inherently required by audiences as such artistry resonates with the unspoken tensions shaping their past and present experiences.

This intricate equilibrium between artistic creativity and socio-political engagement is deeply rooted in earlier stages of the evolution of drama itself. The historical trajectories of the field show that dramatic performance has long served as a critical medium for social reflection, through purposeful aesthetic forms. From ancient ritual and storytelling to its modern artistic forms, as a medium for political resistance and cultural critique, theater has consistently negotiated between entertainment and engagement. This dual dimension, where artistic representation is interwoven with social, political, and economic complexities, establishes performance as a pivotal cultural practice. As such, engaged theatrical practices resist singular approaches, whether purely didactic or solely entertaining. Its efficiency lies precisely in synthesizing creative innovation with critical perceptions, inviting multilayered interpretations and active audience response.

These nuanced aspects of performance art require practitioners to maintain deep awareness of the delicate balance between artistic creativity and social accountability. Such equilibrium necessitates the development of thought-provoking and socially relevant works. This implies that drama writing and performance, when grounded in thorough historical understanding, can produce works that provoke both profound emotional connections and intellectual engagement. For this purpose, all participants in the field need to remain reflexive, contextually informed, and dynamically responsive to the fluctuations of power, identity, and representation that stir social contexts. This ongoing critical engagement allows performance spaces and works to extend beyond their conventional boundaries, hence shifting from mere on-stage representation to active individual and social transformation.

Contemporary Applications: Theater for Social Change

Applied Theater in Unstable Political Contexts

Theater has long served as a lens that allows viewers to critically explore their contextual values, conflicts, and aspirations. Rather than operating as an isolated aesthetic means, drama is deeply embedded within the socio-political networks that both shape and are shaped by performance art. This implies that theater is not a mere entertainment sphere, but a medium of intervention and change, a dynamic area where socio-political awareness is both contested and promoted. Within such a context, evolving contemporary theater practices exemplify how

performance art can intersect with real experiences, in such a way that attempt to bridge the gaps between the stage and the real world. This section explores these fluctuating aspects through key forms of applied theater: social theater, political theater, and education theater. Grounded in relevant theory, it seeks to illustrate both the capacities and limitations of drama as an area of resistance, dialogue, and transformation by underlining the interdependencies linking theater to its socio-political environment.

The escalating socio-political crises, including displacement, economic inequalities, cultural hegemony and political polarization, have prompted new conceptions of performance art as a medium for in-depth social transformation. Within such a context, performance works take on new moral, pedagogical, and political dimensions through various forms of applied theater, including social theater, political theater, or education theater. These forms of performances move beyond local political contexts and restrained cultural identities, reaching broader global issues and ideologies. In doing so, they challenge dominant narratives and hegemonic hierarchies controlling the field of performance art and society at large.

Within this framework, theater's discursive power lies in its ability to foster dialogue, incite critical thinking, and establish connections deeply rooted in real-world contexts. However, the impact of such theatrical interventions is largely contingent upon the ways they are produced and received in various contexts. This is mainly due to the variability of audiences' engagement, the socio-political risks of representation, and the potential technical and material limitations of performance spaces, all of which might determine the extent of transformation that could be realized through applied theater.

The relatedness of theater to its socio-political background implies that drama transcends the liminalities of the conventional curtains and walls to achieve various forms of change within societies. From this perspective, various forms of applied theater today seek to contribute to social change. Social theater, for instance, can take place in different settings: "from prisons, refugee camps, and hospitals to schools, orphanages, and home for the elderly" (Thompson and Schechner 12). Social theater seeks to involve the spectators by allowing them to discuss the subject matter and offer their own interpretations of performances, either by improvising roles within the performance or even by mapping and re-mapping patterns of knowledge abiding by certain discursive, spiritual and aesthetic rules. Thus, social theater obliquely attempts to bring about long-term social change.

Applied Theater: A Zone of Resistance and Healing

Like social theater, political theater incites the audience to think about certain issues and, hence, act in accordance with a specific humanized view of the issues discussed. Within this context, Baracco gives the examples of *Golda's Balcony* and *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* as two performances that provide the audiences with a human perspective on the Palestinian cause's tensions (Baracco). This means that political theater seeks to make the audiences and drama practices react to socio-political prevailing realities and performances' conventional modes and rules by embracing liberty outside the elites' confined loci. This is likely to lead to the emergence of new performance modes that would build up new taxonomies and hierarchies in the performance worlds and create new orders, placing certain modes and groups in central positions, while relegating others to the periphery in a network of ever-vibrating relations.

Similarly, education theater could be considered as a means of social change since it seeks to "use theatre as a tool to explore ideas, feelings and values rather than to teach children how to put on plays" (Nicholson 24). Education theater in aims at involving youths in particular topics through inciting them to be active learners, exchange ideas freely and think critically. It is a sort of "group drama therapy [that] allows for an even more dynamic approach, where participants learn, engage, and grow together" (Harmer 3). The term goes back to the 1960s and

1970s when schools in England collaborated with theater companies to include theater in educational activities either as an "extracurricular stage presentation, as a course of study within the approved curriculum, or as a teaching strategy that is used in a variety of subject areas" (O'Farrell). Such performances generate a supportive educational atmosphere: they are "Restorative practices [that] seek to create a culture of equity, communication, growth, and relationship" (Harmer 3).

These forms of applied theater, especially activist performances shaped by socio-political conflicts, are premised on thoroughly structured dramaturgies associated with specific social contexts. These works call upon audiences to participate through multiple avenues: direct involvement in performances, post-performance discussions or even contribution to real-life activism. However, this potential social change remains uncertain, contingent upon the conditions of production and reception of the performance. This uncertainty is considered constitutive by Kelleher, who argues that 'instability and unpredictability' fundamentally shape theater's value (24). Rancière further underscores this idea as he argues that the reactions engendered by activist theater depend fundamentally on the extent of the audiences' engagement and other situational factors (Rancière, *The Politics* 61). Yet he argues that all spectators are, in fact, active (Rancière, *The Emancipated* 13), hence rejecting the passive spectator myth.

In examining the multifaceted practices of applied theater, this section has highlighted the deeply embedded relationship between performance and the socio-political realities from which it emerges. These forms of theater not only reflect the cultural and ideological tensions of their time but also attempt to intervene in them by fostering critical engagement, participatory dialogue, and the possibility of social transformation. Yet, their efficacy remains contingent upon a range of factors, including modes of production, audience reception, and the broader political and material conditions that shape their articulation and impact.

Theoretical frameworks that support or critique these practices reveal that applied theater is not a universally stable agent of change, but rather a dynamic, context-dependent medium whose transformative capacity is characterized by both promise and precarity. In this sense, applied theater operates within an intricate interplay of aspiration and limitation, which is simultaneously capable of disrupting dominant narratives and susceptible to subsumption or inefficiency. Ultimately, understanding applied theater's role as a catalyst for social change requires an ongoing critical engagement with its shifting forms, its embeddedness in power structures, and its potential to reimagine modes of representation, participation, and collective agency.

Theater and Healing Trauma

Performance as Social Transformation and Healing

Theater has consistently served as a medium for contesting power dynamics and inciting socio-political change. This engaged role addresses psychological healing as well, particularly in contexts of violence and displacement where theater becomes a refuge and healing space, transcending its conventional critical function. This occurs, particularly, in contexts of extreme collective trauma, which refers to "what happens when the extreme stress of an event or circumstances overwhelms one's ability to cope" (Johnson and Sajnani 3). In such settings, theater empowers trauma survivors to confront systemic exclusion and reconstruct personal narratives. It is through this dual process of reflection and restoration that individuals start to reclaim their identities fractured by conflict.

Drawing on the work of Roth (1) and Rădulescu (95), this section examines the ways performance can serve as a medium of healing for individuals and communities affected by armed conflicts and displacement. It explores the therapeutic dimensions of performance works, which may emerge through telling individual accounts, involving audiences in performances, or symbolically subverting oppressive regimes. Storytelling, absurdist humor, and symbolic gestures are key dramatic techniques emphasized in this section as they collectively function to challenge traumatic histories, while offering trauma survivors a space for emotional catharsis and recovery.

The discussion highlights theater's dual capacity to drive both socio-political transformation and psychological recovery, positioning performance as a vital medium for facing violent histories and survival narratives. It attempts to illustrate how theater can function as a liminal space where individual and collective healing intersect with artistic expression, enabling the emergence of suppressed voices and the rise of activist art. In doing so, this section positions theater within the areas of trauma studies and performance theory, highlighting its role both in remapping power relations and furthering the healing of receivers, survivors of traumatic events in hostile contexts, through performances that are entertaining and change-seeking all at once.

In this vein, Roth considers that theater has not only an entertaining function, but also a healing role when dealing with trauma (1). Likewise, Rădulescu underlines the role of drama in healing trauma through the way drama writing reveals the playwright's personal experience as well as that of the receivers (95). Similarly, Sarul argues that the communal aspect of dramatic performance enables audiences to collectively observe and interact with distressing narratives of war, rather than experiencing them individually. This therapeutic dimension of joint spectatorship aligns with new perspectives on trauma healing through collective support. Through this lens, drama can be used as trauma therapy by letting people relate and act their survival stories, or by allowing spectators to discover the past stories of others and sympathize with them.

In addition to conventional acting and storytelling, drama therapy incorporates humor as a vital therapeutic means. In this regard, Rădulescu refers to the theater of the absurd as a prime example, where oblique sarcasm and performance function to expose oppressive regimes and social injustices (15). Through the enactment of these critiques, absurdist theater directly addresses trauma and suffering, hence its powerful healing feature. This approach proves particularly efficient for the victims of armed conflicts, including military personnel, who often tend to suppress their emotions as a consequence of wartime suffering. Such enforced silence, however, might eventually manifest through hazardous reactions, unless channeled into constructive healthier outlets, such as drama therapy (Sarul). Artistic expression, especially drama therapy, is one of these outlets as it transcends conventional verbal processing or physical expression by adopting a unique combination of narratives, gestures, and parody. It is such a multidisciplinary approach that provides the victims of violent conflicts with an effective means of emotional release. Viewed in this way, the absurdist techniques described by Rădulescu are particularly effective and safe means for externalizing postwar trauma (15). Additionally, beyond providing a creative conduit for emotional release, public exposure of trauma through drama therapy may help prevent recurring tragedies like mass violence and forced migrations.

Such public testimonies on trauma and oppression constitute a form of "ethical trauma treatment [which] entails revealing and acknowledging these obscured power dynamics" as described by Johnson and Sajnani (4). From their perspective, trauma is seen as "the result of the illegitimate exercise of power" whereby oppressors are screened as uncovering them might unsettle their power dynamics: "the spotlight is instead turned on the victim, who is suffering, who has been diagnosed, whose brain functioning is of interest" (Johnson and Sajnani 4).

Resistance Through Performance in Oppressive Contexts

The previous analysis illustrates how theater creates spaces for marginalized voices to articulate their experiences through words, gestures, and sounds, reconstructing personal and collective histories. Hence, these enacted techniques endow past traumatic stories with a sort of present immediacy that engages audiences psychologically while compelling them to confront historical injustices. within this paradigm, even audience silence is viewed as active participation, a powerful form of resistance against staged representations of genocide and displacement (Rădulescu 101).

Performance art, along these lines, functions as a catalyst for both empowering marginalized narratives and deconstructing dominant historical accounts. Being socially engaged, such performances extend beyond mere reality representation to foster individual and collective recovery, particularly in contexts of violent conflicts and displacement. It is through well-organized collective aesthetic actions that performance functions therapeutically as it challenges trauma, amplifies silenced voices, and restores agency, a process akin to collective organization in military units where conflict and healing are intertwined (Sarul). Like a coherent military body, performance provides a structured space for collective testimony and renovation. Theatrical spaces thus emerge as transformative areas for embodied communal memory, generating new pathways for liberation.

It is through such artistic mediums that trauma survivors can recount, personify, and reframe their histories, whereby these experiences become means of fostering resilience and interpersonal compassion. This therapeutic dimension is empowered through a range of performance strategies, including narrative re-enactment, physical expression, symbolic resistance, and even the pre-planned use of silence and humor. In this vein, Rădulescu regards the theater of the absurd as a reflection of how satirical representations could destabilize oppressive regimes, confront systemic violence, and prompt psychological liberation without resorting to conventional, and often simplistic, reproduction of trauma (25). These aesthetic techniques enable the stage to turn into a site where traumatic memory is both recalled and reworked, where performers and audiences alike engage in a process of critical reflection and prospective regeneration.

Likewise, as performances revive traumatic histories, they blur space and time boundaries, allowing audiences to live and taste the immediacy of past experiences. This process turns into an inherent political act, one that transforms spectators from passive recipients into actively engaged participants. It is a dynamic exchange through which audiences' commitment extends beyond mere sympathy with survivors to confront the systemic hierarchies generating violence. From this perspective, healing trauma through theater is not limited to individual catharsis, as it involves broader issues of justice, ethics and historical accountability. The ethical dimension of therapeutic drama is highlighted by Johnson and Sajnani as they argue that "the psychotherapeutic and drama therapeutic treatment of trauma cannot be separated from ethics" (22). Thus, performance, through embodying lived experiences, does more than commemorate past histories: it calls upon communities to challenge past atrocities and prevent their recurrence.

This in mind, theater becomes a living archive of survival memories and historical testimony, resurrecting trauma through a network of gestures, pauses, and sounds, hence creating a universal medium of communication that transcends linguistic barriers and cultural divides. That theater sets the scene for the emergence of oppressed voices both through spoken language and performed action, is an obvious assertion of the performers', along with the audience's, right to be seen, heard, and felt. Trauma therapy through theater is not merely curative as it helps regenerate individual awareness and collective memory through this interweaved combination of aesthetics and activism, empathy and action. Performance, per se, emerges as a

key element balancing the ongoing struggle for historical responsibility, established justice and human dignity.

Case Study: *Crossing the Lines*

Contextual Background

In the aftermath of armed conflicts, societies frequently resort to theater as a major vehicle through which the legacies of war, displacement, and trauma are uncovered. This is particularly evident in post-war Balkan contexts, where performance has played a key role in establishing justice and fostering collective memory, hence enabling the victims to heal and recreate new perspectives on life. *Dah Theater* and *Women in Black*, two troupes founded in Belgrade in the wake of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, are among the most compelling examples of this combination of art, activism, and therapy. These groups have relied on purposeful performances to confront the atrocities inflicted upon local communities by war, and ethnic divides. In doing so, they have been motivated by a shared commitment to promote peaceful coexistence, enhance feminist resistance, and fight radical nationalism.

Their collaborative work is illustrated through the performance *Crossing the Lines*, which marks a shift of focus in performance art toward theatrical forms associated in Rădulescu's work with warfare and exile (95): politically and morally committed performances that attempt to document suffering, boost peace and understanding, and concretize social change. These groups steer away from the constraints of conventional theaters, opting instead to stage their performances in public spheres. Their aim is to upset dominant narratives by foregrounding the lived experiences of war survivors, including women, displaced civilians, and victims of sexual violence.

While *Crossing the Lines* attempts to document past histories, it also contributes to the restoration of post-war identities and geographies through a rich range of performance techniques, including embodied storytelling, ritualized gestures, song, collage, and symbolic actions. It is through a sort of dual discourse that these performances function, offering performers and audiences a space for psychological healing while embodying, all at once, a form of political action that confronts oppressive systems, such as radical nationalism, militarism, and patriarchal violence.

Performance as Testimony

This section illustrates how the collaborative work of *Dah Theater* and *Women* in Black exemplifies the theater's ability to mediate in the aftermath of atrocities, rather than merely represent them. The ensuing discussion highlights those key features in *Crossing the Lines* that embody the transformative potential of performance art, combining socio-political activism and trauma recovery. This section also sheds light on the dramaturgies of both groups, focused on producing a form of applied theater that seeks to engage audiences and goes beyond conventional aesthetic norms by merging art with political resistance, collective memory, and emotional recovery. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates how the performances of *Dah Theater* and *Women in Black* allude to the possibility of restoring societies shattered by conflict, confronting historical injustices and paving the way for more inclusion and understanding.

As already mentioned, *Crossing the Lines* is a play written and performed thanks to the collaboration of the following groups: *Dah Theatre* and *Women in Black. Dah Theatre* is a group of experimental theater based in Belgrade and founded in the aftermath of the Balkan War in 1991. Dah refers to breath in the Serbian language. The name is suggestive of hope, peace, and

overcoming the pain of the past. The group seeks "to use theatre as a mode of reconciliation across ethnic and religious lines" (Simic 118), imposed by the atrocities of war during the 1990s. *Women in Black* was also founded in 1991. It is a group that adopts peaceful "protest against the war; the Serbian regime's policy; nationalism; militarism and all forms of hatred, discrimination and violence" ("Vigils around the World-Europa-Serbia").

The group collaborates with the *Dah theatre* in organizing performances that portray war atrocities and attempt to help the victims overcome their trauma and suffering engendered by violence and displacement. This collaborative work also seeks to facilitate the reintegration of civilian victims in a constantly changing society. The two groups present performances outside conventional dramatic settings: their shows take place in streets and public places to raise awareness about issues related to war, injustice, and racism. For instance, actresses belonging to the group *Women in Black* "would gather in public spaces dressed in black and stand in silence as a sign of protest, in remembrance of the victims of war and in resistance against its absurdity and horror, and in defiance to all the potential Serbian pro-war attackers. It should be noted that these protests are normally "protected by a cordon of police" (Rădulescu 185).

Crossing the Lines is one of those performances presented in different countries that used to constitute the former Yugoslavia thanks to the collaboration of the two groups. It displays the real testimonies of refugees from various ethnicities, especially, women, allowing them to disclose their suffering and underscore the universal character of pain resulting from colonial control and power struggles. The performance highlights the strength of women who challenged all the atrocities they endured and managed to tell their lived stories. It combines storytelling with other arts, such as singing and dance, in addition to "movie images of Bosnian women and of the war" which are "superimposed on the live performance, which evokes the Brechtian technique of collage and the postmodernist aesthetic of mixed media images of the war. Simic considers the Bosnian women accounts not only part of the performance, but also "legal testimonies of war crimes" (119). Hence, such testimonies could be used for suing criminals involved in war crimes, a fact that concretizes how theater can contribute to the remapping of the aftermath of war through actual paradigm shifts. In doing so, a more secure and just context for the victims of armed conflicts may emerge.

The play also includes scenes portraying the suffering Bosnian women were subject to before they managed to escape from the Serbian Rape camps to seek Asylum in neighboring countries. For instance, "one of the actresses slaps her own face in an accelerated rhythm and with increasing violence, while the others clap or stomp their feet on the ground, creating a maddening rhythm that is meant to tell the story of the violence and torture suffered by women in the rape camps" (Radelescu 186). Like the images of war, which are superimposed on the performance, including dance and storytelling, the violent sounds of slapping the face and hitting the ground are all interwoven with the singing actress's voice. This combination of stories, dance, images and sounds embodies the victory of the victims of rape and torture, the triumph of peace and life and the uselessness and cruelty of war and hatred in a world inherently characterized by diversity and coexistence.

Dual Function: Political Challenge and Trauma Work

The performance has two major dimensions. One is related to the political aftermath of war, as the play seeks to reorder the hierarchies of power relations through embodying a novel form of performance, a dimension that aims to raise the audience's awareness of the atrocities of war and highlight the necessity of peaceful coexistence and non-violent dialogue. In this way, the performance implicitly stimulates actions that might tip the scales in favor of peace continuity

and the avoidance of past mistakes that could trigger a new war, thereby placing those powers of discrimination and colonialism in the periphery. The second dimension of the performance is revealed through its therapeutic role as the actions of the play are aimed at helping the Bosnian women overcome their trauma either as performers who tell their real stories of rape, torture and displacement or as viewers who witnessed traumatizing conflicts not only in the geographical area presented in the performance, but also all over the globe.

The therapeutic dimension of the play is particularly evident in actions aimed at alleviating the psychological suffering of Bosnian women through a variety of expressive means, including singing, dance, and storytelling. This function is confirmed in the final scene where an actress offers the spectators apples as a symbol of wisdom and healing. Subsequently, the actresses form a circle as they pour salt on the stage floor. This action "is symbolic of purification and cleansing following the purging of painful and traumatic experiences" (Rădulescu 186). In the end, they put a flower inside the circle to symbolize their victory over fear, torture, and displacement, an illustration of a universal hope in a brighter future that challenges the atrocity and gloominess of the past and remaps the networks of relations among diversified geographies, identities and powers. Such theatrical performances, linked to war and exile (Rădulescu 95), allow hybrid identities to disclose their experiences and speak of their individual sufferings in such a way that underlines the universality of exile and mass killings. Here, political theater or activist theater plays a multi-faceted role that combines therapy with putting an end to past tragic mistakes and launching a new march towards a better future.

This analysis has highlighted the intricacies and transformative power of theater as an artistic practice deeply embedded within its social context. It demonstrates how the relatedness of theatrical practice to socio-political realities enables performances to transcend aesthetic representation and dynamically engage with the lived human experiences, especially those marked by suffering, exclusion, and conflict. The unique nature of such performances, manifested in their tacitly dialogic structure, emotional discourse, and symbolic language, situates them as active channels that encompass both political critique of hegemonic power mechanisms and psychological therapy for the trauma inflicted by historical violence. As illustrated earlier, performances belonging to applied and activist theater, predominantly those associated with contexts of war, displacement, and systemic inequalities, restructure trauma rather than merely representing it. They do so through embodied storytelling, audience engagement, and purposeful performance rituals that create the appropriate conditions conducive to both commemoration and recovery.

From this perspective, these engaged performances increasingly erase the boundaries between the psychological, political, artistic, and therapeutic dimensions. They turn into liminal spaces in which erased narratives are foregrounded, memory is resurrected, and trauma is alienated. These theatrical practices subvert dominant discourses and restore agency for individuals and communities impacted by displacement, violence, or oppression. The audience in such performances is not merely a passive recipient, but an active participant, who is emotionally and morally engaged. This dynamic involvement is a key factor in the identification and reform process. Along these lines, theater cultivates collective awareness of the past and incites a potential shift toward future realities grounded in justice and integrity.

Conversely, the power of these performances is determined by the socio-political contexts of their staging, as well as the circumstances of their production and reception, the fact that explains the nonlinear character of their impact. What remains obvious, however, is theater's constant ability to navigate the multiple dimensions of suffering and resistance, visibility and elimination, voice and silence. As a form of embodied awareness and emotional testimony, theatre reshapes how trauma is perceived, experienced, and recounted across geographies, identities, and histories.

Conclusion: The Transformative Potential of Performance

Through exploring the transformative potential of performance art, this paper has illustrated how theater functions not only as a means of aesthetic expression but also as an effective medium for social and political change. Contemporary performance practices have evolved into dynamic platforms for addressing vital human and political issues, including war, exile, discrimination, and trauma. This demonstrates how such performances can undermine established power structures and hierarchies, while simultaneously providing spaces for recovery and resistance. By engaging audiences psychologically and intellectually, such performances facilitate communication across geographical boundaries and cultural divides, opening new avenues for dialogue, reflection, and action to address universal concerns.

As illustrated throughout the analysis of *Crossing the Lines*, contexts marked by conflict and trauma exemplify how performance art can seamlessly erase the boundaries between artistic creativity and political activism. Such committed performances further a deeper understanding of the intricacies of human resilience and suffering in unstable political contexts. They achieve this by engaging with actual experiences, employing multimedia elements, and adopting cautiously devised theatrical techniques. Such works not only allow marginalized voices to become visible but also provide spaces for healing individuals and communities influenced by political violence. It is this visibility and empowerment of the oppressed that contributes to the remapping of power mechanisms, thereby promoting deeper socio-political change.

The preceding discussion and illustrations highlight how the recent innovations in the progressive roles of performance art are triggering new theoretical and research advancements at the intersection of theater, individual psychology, and collective socio-political realities. Thus, theater and performance art function as dynamic, multilayered mediums that enable individuals and communities to overcome collective trauma, resist discrimination, and drive social change. These artistic forms operate within a complex world where shifting power dynamics, identity issues, and political forces continually influence both real-world experiences and how they are perceived. It is this intricate ability to uncover lived experiences, critique realities, and heal individuals and communities that makes theater a driving force in the continuous struggle for an integrated world, one wherein justice and empathy prevail.

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Magical Feminism as Ontological Resistance in Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms*

Brahim Barhoun
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan
LLCIS Research Laboratory

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Brahim Barhoun is a Professor of English Studies in the Department of English Language and Literature at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tétouan, Morocco. He received his PhD in the Literature of English-speaking Countries from the Complutense University of Madrid. His research interests include Anglo-American Literature, Postcolonial Literature, and Peace Literature. Currently, he is the Coordinator of the Interdisciplinary Studies in English Language, Culture & Literature MA Program and the Vice Director of the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural & Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab (Abdelmalek Essaadi University).

bbarhoun@uae.ac.ma

https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6842-7950

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Brahim Barhoun
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan
LLCIS Research Laboratory

ABSTRACT

The present article reads Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms* as a foundational text in the emerging discourse of Arab magical feminism. Through a close analysis of narrative strategies, mythopoetic figures, and carceral imaginaries, the study shows how magical realism disrupts hegemonic epistemologies, particularly those grounded in colonial historiography and patriarchal scripture. Central to this inquiry are the intertwined concepts of magical supplementation, or the insertion of the marvelous into empirical reality, and defamiliarization, which estranges normative perception to foreground structures of oppression and resistance to them. The novel's protagonists—Maryam, Zohra, and Sheherazade—are delineated as agents of feminist ontological rupture. Each articulates resistance via embodied knowledge, mythic lineage, and insurgent narration. Meanwhile, the carceral sites of Birsoukout and the demons' lair stand for the symbolic architectures of state violence, with their estranged portrayals challenging official memory and producing affective counter-historiographies. By situating Alaoui's work within transnational magical realist traditions while anchoring it in North African cosmologies, the article argues for the epistemic and aesthetic distinctiveness of Arab magical feminism. Alaoui writes to reclaim the magical as a space of feminist and postcolonial intervention and positions narrative itself as a vehicle for ontological repair, genealogical recovery, and political insurrection.

KEYWORDS

Magical Feminism

Magical Supplementation

Defamiliarization

Carceral Epistemology

Resistance

Introduction

For centuries, women's voices have been systematically excluded from history, theology, and literature through a process rooted in patriarchal scriptural interpretation, colonial historiography, and Eurocentric canon formation. This epistemic violence distorts the historical record while reinforcing hegemonic narratives that delegitimize female ways of knowing. According to Bettany Hughes, although women comprise half of the global population, they "only occupy around 0.5% of recorded history," a statistic that starkly illustrates the magnitude

Contact ✉ bbarhoun@uae.ac.ma
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of the cultural erasure women suffer (Ansary 13) and the active construction of ignorance that forecloses alternative epistemic and narrative possibilities.

Literature, being both an outcome of social context and an axis of culture construction, has itself historically perpetuated reductive portrayals of women, while elevating the male perspective to universal status (Booker 89, 96). In this sense, the literary canon is seen to function as a gendered technology of exclusion that systematically suppresses female agency and voice.

Feminist literary criticism emerged in response to this imbalance, working along two axes: the critique of canonical texts that reinforce patriarchal ideologies, and the recovery and reimagination of narratives centered on women's experiences, genealogies, and voices. One of the most potent narrative strategies feminist writers employ is magical realism, a genre that merges empirical and metaphysical realities to disrupt such Western binaries as rational versus irrational, history versus myth, and body versus spirit. Wendy B. Faris considers magical realism a "radical modification of dominant realism in the West" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 1), highlighting its decolonial and epistemologically plural potential to surface submerged histories and affective truths. Likewise, Sawsan Malla Hussein and Brahim Barhoun contend that magical realism seeks to redress "the basic norms and données of a European realist representation long associated with erecting and maintaining power relations" (10).

In contexts shaped by colonial and patriarchal domination, magical realism becomes an ontological counter-discourse. Treating myth, memory, and spirit as equally real and politically charged, it channels feminist and postcolonial critique. When deliberately aligned with feminist revindications, magical realism gives rise to what is now called magical feminism. Theorized by Patricia Hart, Abu Shahid Abdullah, and others, magical feminism foregrounds female agency through metaphysical resistance, genealogical re-inscription, and symbolic disruption. It "reacts to specific feminist concerns to subvert homogeneous patriarchal dominance," presenting the magical not as escapist fantasy but as a political mode of ontological repair (Wells 20).

Nevertheless, despite its critical potential, Arabic magical realism, particularly by women writers, remains underexamined. Existing Arabic-language criticism, such as Hamed Abu Ahmed's *Al-Waq'iyyah al-Sihriyya fi al-Riwayah al-'Arabiyyah* [*Magical Realism in the Arab Novel*], focuses almost exclusively on Egyptian male authors. The book's narrow scope overlooks both the geographic diversity and the substantial contributions of Arab women to the genre. This oversight is further compounded by the continued privileging of Latin American and Anglophone writers such as Isabel Allende, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, and Helen Oyeyemi, whose works are widely recognized within magical realist and feminist canons. To fully understand the political and aesthetic reach of magical realism, the canon must expand to include Arab women's literary articulations and reframe the genre as a transnational and epistemologically plural form.

Within this critical gap, *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms* by Moroccan writer Mhani Alaoui emerges as a paradigmatic text of Arab magical feminism. Set in postcolonial Morocco, the novel fuses Berber mythology, Islamic mysticism, feminist critique, and postcolonial trauma into a narrative where magic is ontologically mutinous. Its protagonist, Maryam, descended from the mythic figure of Lilith, embodies a feminine genealogy of resistance that traverses memory, myth, and political violence. Guided by a matriarchal network of powerful women, Maryam's journey reclaims female subjectivity and becomes a transformative site of political, spiritual, and narrative insurrection.

This paper argues that Alaoui's novel employs two core narrative strategies, namely magical supplementation and defamiliarization, to enact feminist and postcolonial resistance. Magical supplementation, or the "irreducible element of magic" in Faris's terms, refers to the insertion of magical phenomena as ontologically real interventions that counter historical erasure and

gendered marginalization (*Ordinary Enchantments* 7). It resists realist conventions by asserting the validity of spiritual, mythical, and embodied knowledges excluded from dominant historiographies. Defamiliarization, theorized by Viktor Shklovsky and later adapted by Faris, Christopher Warnes, and others, estranges the familiar to destabilize entrenched epistemic assumptions. In Alaoui's hands, this strategy acquires a distinct political valence: urban uprisings, carceral spaces, and rebellious subjectivities are rendered uncanny, revealing the psychic violence of patriarchy and authoritarianism in viscerally unsettling terms.

Through close readings of character, symbolic geographies, and narrative structure, the study situates *Dreams of Maryam Tair* within a global feminist genealogy of magical realism while grounding it in North African epistemological frameworks. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive critical discourse that underscores Arab women's contributions to magical feminist literature. Alaoui's novel not only reimagines Moroccan history and mythology through a feminist lens but also reasserts literature's capacity to function as a space of ontological reparation, affective remembrance, and insurgent imagination.

Critical Framework

Magical Realism, Magical Feminism, and Arab Cultural Specificity

Magical realism has long resisted reductive categorization, operating at the intersection of genre, aesthetic, and cultural orientation. Its origins can be traced to Franz Roh's 1925 treatise on German post-Expressionist art. However, it gained literary traction through the post-Boom Latin American novel, where it emerged as a distinctive narrative form. Within literary theory, scholars such as Wendy B. Faris, Amaryll Chanady, and Lois Parkinson Zamora have delineated the defining characteristics that differentiate magical realism from both realism and fantasy. In *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Faris notably identifies the "irreducible element of magic," or the reporting of "extraordinary … events … in the same way in which other, ordinary events are recounted," to be essential to the genre's resistance against the epistemological dominance of Western rationalism. Its other distinctive features include a "strong presence of the phenomenal world" (14), hesitation or doubt (17), and defamiliarization (23).

Chanady comments on how magical realism encapsulates a non-hierarchical dualism, sustaining the coexistence of the empirical and the magical without privileging one register over the other (25–26). This formal strategy is not merely aesthetic; it performs a political function by foregrounding marginalized worldviews. Zamora and Faris posit that magical realism reconfigures the margins by recuperating historically silenced epistemologies (Zamora and Faris 3–7). That is why the genre holds particular appeal for postcolonial writers aiming to contest Eurocentric narratives of modernity that dismiss myth, affect, and spirituality for being irrational.

Magical realism's global diffusion, from Latin America to the Caribbean, South Asia, and North Africa, proves both its translatability and its capacity for counter-discursive innovation. Malla Hussein and Barhoun affirm that "there is nothing organic about magical realism that should make it the preserve of a specific geographic location alone" (8). In the same vein, Mariano Siskind celebrates the global reconceptualization of the mode, arguing that it should be considered a transnational narrative strategy (24). This repositioning allows works akin to *Dreams of Maryam Tair* to enter the conversation as culturally rooted interventions that recalibrate the aesthetic and political horizons of magical realism.

When magical realism takes on explicitly feminist imperatives and "attempts to give a voice to marginalised women …, it can be labelled magical feminism" (Abdullah 2). Writing on Isabel Allende, Hart defines magical feminism as a hybrid form that channels bodily memory, ancestral wisdom, and intergenerational trauma into a storytelling praxis where women repossess narrative power and ontological legitimacy (14–17). Kimberly Wells expands on Hart's formulation, describing magical feminism as a mode that "reacts to specific feminist concerns to subvert homogeneous patriarchal dominance" (20). Magical feminism insists on its political stakes, particularly in relation to embodiment, sexuality, and historical erasure.

Central to magical feminist aesthetics are tropes of bodily knowledge and mythic genealogy. Valerie Henitiuk enriches this discourse through her reading of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, where the female body—grotesque, mythic, and enchantingly subversive—functions as a locus of radical epistemological rupture. Henitiuk explains that Carter "constructs magical spaces, both physical/actual and metaphorical/imaginary, within otherwise realistic fictional parameters… allow[ing] a web of new, previously unimagined, subversive possibilities" (418). This feminist strategy, she argues, "encourage[s] readers to participate in the deconstruction, rather than validation, of established worldviews that constrict or malign women" (419). Julia Maria Schneider further extends the framework by theorizing a similar genealogy of resistance in Mexican women's literature, wherein women's narratives are informed by matrilineal memory, ritual knowledge, and ancestral spirit work.

In contexts shaped by the twin forces of colonialism and patriarchy, the political potency of magical feminism becomes especially acute. Maggie Ann Bowers stresses the value of magical realism "for fictions written from the perspective of the politically or culturally disempowered," thereby accommodating feminist, indigenous, and diasporic perspectives (31–32). A comparable potential is manifest in Alaoui's narrative, which integrates mysticism and subaltern embodiment to reconstruct female subjectivity into a counter-hegemonic expression of agency. It is a form of feminist authorship that bell hooks qualifies as transformative resistance: "to love and to resist through writing is to radically transform, to imagine new possibilities that do not fit within the traditional binary structures that dominate us" (45).

The cultural specificity of Alaoui's magical feminism is inseparable from Arab literary heritage. According to Abu Ahmed, Arabic literary traditions have long been steeped in magical epistemologies. The roots of these run through "*The One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Book of Wonders of the Kings of Himyar*, popular epics, *The Wonders of India*, *The Voyage of al-Sirafi*, *Stories of the Prophets*, *The Stories of the Qur'an*, *The Book of Songs* ... and many other works that fall into the domain of narrative as we understand it today" (15; my translation). These traditions deem the supernatural integral to the real, a worldview that renders magical realism organic to the Arab imaginary.

Nevertheless, in "From the Inside of Belief: Magic and Religion," Kim Anderson Sasser makes the case that "religion remains one of the most neglected elements in magical realist studies," a lacuna resulting from the dominance of secular frameworks within Western literary criticism (243). The omission is particularly limiting in Islamic contexts, where mysticism, dreams, and esoteric symbolism are foundational knowledge systems. In *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, Alaoui draws richly on Sufi metaphysics, Islamic cosmology, and Berber myth to create an alternative order of life, one that enables the sacred to be politically subversive.

Brahim El Guabli's theorization of emotional histories as other-archives deepens the analytical lens through which Alaoui's narrative strategies can be read. In his study of post-violence memory cultures in Morocco, El Guabli postulates that histories effaced by state repression, colonialism, and patriarchal epistemologies do not vanish but are reconstituted in sensory, embodied, and spatial registers through oral transmission, spiritual performance, and cultural production that elude official memory (16). Alaoui activates this alternative archival

economy and enacts a mode of feminist postcolonial historiography anchored in trauma, myth, and resistance as sensuous and sacred experiences.

Narrative Resistance: Magical Supplementation and Defamiliarization

Magical Supplementation

Magical realism resists dominant notions of reality by expanding the boundaries of the real through what Faris calls irreducible elements: events that defy empirical logic yet are narrated with the same gravity as everyday occurrences (7). The events are not symbolic metaphors but disruptions to the fabric of reality, "accepted but not explained" (7). In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Remedios the Beauty ascends to the sky while folding laundry, and elsewhere, Macondo suffers a plague of insomnia so severe that objects must be labeled to retain meaning. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the ghost of a murdered child returns as a fully grown woman. Such phenomena are not treated with surprise or rupture in tone; they exist on the same ontological plane as realistic events (8).

This narrative strategy suspends binary logic by presenting magical elements without authorial commentary or epistemological hierarchy. Chanady clarifies that although the implied author recognizes the supernatural as contradictory to natural law, they adopt the worldview of the represented culture to portray it authentically. The situation generates a narrative structure wherein "two conflicting logical codes" are held in tension, prompting readers to "suspend [their] judgment of what is rational and what is irrational in the fictitious world" (25–26). Olatubosun Ogunsanwo describes this condition, writing "there is no assimilation of one narrative mode by the other ... The intertexts assume parallel status … debunking the mutual exclusivity of centre and margin" (45). Magical realism, in consequence, unsettles the very framework of realism, preserving the irreducible and resistant nature of the supernatural.

Kumkum Sangari complicates the ontological layering of the genre by linking it to historical violence. He posits that the "simultaneity of the heterogeneous" reflects "miscegenation, syncretisation … conflict, contradiction, and cultural violence" (158). Far from being mere textual effects, the conflicting logics are embedded traces of colonial and postcolonial experience which produce a form of historically and culturally corrective work. Eventually, magical supplementation materializes as a form of narrative resistance, "a mode of thought," in Anne Hegerfeldt's words (237). By rendering the figurative literal, magical realist texts recover and revalidate suppressed forms of knowing that empirical rationalism has historically ostracized.

Resistance here is not only narrative but deeply political too. David Young and Keith Hollaman capture how magical realism challenges "the political and metaphysical definitions of the real by which most of us live" (3). The presence of the fantastic revokes the inherited rules of causality, temporality, and perception. In D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, for example, Lisa's psychosomatic pain occurs before the trauma that causes it, collapsing the chronology of memory and event. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Melquíades's manuscript records and predicts events simultaneously, challenging the reader's grasp of fate and agency.

Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu articulates the geopolitical force of this strategy further. Magical realism, for her, disrupts "the privileging of 'first world truths' over 'third world myths'" (198). In doing so, it recovers marginalized epistemologies and reclaims their narrative authority, no longer subordinating them to Western rationalism. The irreducibly magical thus asserts that marginalized truths do not need to justify themselves in the language of dominant paradigms; they, defiantly, exist. In *So Far from God*, Ana Castillo verifies the reappearance of the dead

Esperanza by noting that she "was also occasionally seen. Yes, seen, not only by La Loca, but also by Domingo who saw her from the front window …. And once, although she had thought at first it was a dream, Esperanza came and lay down next to her mother" (163). This verification underscores the irreducibility of Esperanza's return. It is not a hallucination or metaphor; it is something that *is*, despite the impossibility (*Ordinary Enchantments* 8).

Defamiliarization

In magical realism, the magical does not always arrive as an external disruption; it may grow imperceptibly out of the ordinary, subtly estranging the familiar. This dynamic aligns with the literary strategy of defamiliarization, which reframes reality to expose its limits, habitual structures, and the ideological assumptions that underpin it. Scott Simpkins observes, "Perhaps magic realism's goal is to return our focus to the backdrop of textual reality, its production and function, by defamiliarizing it" (151).

Defamiliarization is most famously theorized by Viktor Shklovsky, who argues that "the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (12). This is accomplished through techniques that "make objects unfamiliar," slow down recognition, and prolong perception, tactics that serve both aesthetic and ideological ends (12). Shklovsky describes these as "games of nonrecognition," which may involve withholding names, redescribing everyday objects as if newly discovered, or displacing familiar associations. In doing so, art "makes the stone stony," reawakening our awareness of the world's strangeness (12).

Defamiliarization is fundamental to the narrative design of magical realism. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the arrival of Melquíades's gypsies bearing ice and magnets transforms mundane objects into mysteries of cosmic significance. The language does not announce magic; instead, it renders the real surreal and invites the reader to question the boundaries between wonder and fact. *Midnight's Children* achieves similar effects with hummingbirds, while *Shame* treats Omar's three mothers as a narrative given. These texts do not insert fantasy into realism; they realign realism so that its internal limits are exposed and transcended.

Christopher Warnes remarks that defamiliarization reclaims aesthetic agency, returning "freshness and aesthetic appreciation to familiar, ordinary objects" (85). Importantly, this aesthetic reframing carries ideological implications. Shklovsky warns that habitualization "devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (12). By disrupting this automatism, defamiliarization restores moral urgency to things dulled by repetition or normalized by dominant ideology.

The scope of defamiliarization can reshape the contours of historical understanding as well. In magical realism, historical events are not presented as transparent facts but as mythic, grotesque, or implausible phenomena. Readers sometimes find history an unstable, layered, and spectral narrative. They discover that fiction is able to contest the authority of sanctioned memory and forge new epistemological pathways. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie insightfully states, "Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups attempt to shape the world in their own image; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying official, politicians' version of truth" (14). The antagonism between narrative and power becomes central to the function of defamiliarization as a counter-discursive trope, reimagining history from the margins and reinserting excluded voices into collective memory.

Timothy Brennan supports this idea, discerning in magical realism "a sense of exasperation, despair and wonder in the face of authority that is so far outside the moral and intellectual constraints of the observer that its actions are 'unbelievable'" (174). Such narrative estrangement reveals how official histories often operate to sustain epistemic and political control. Édouard Glissant similarly writes that historical disclosure in postcolonial literature

"paradoxically, is not performed each time in an open and clear way" (107). Shalini Puri adds that magical realism's "dense web of coded historical reference functions largely without realist exposition as such" (169). These insights emphasize the genre's capacity to stage a kind of indirect historical reckoning, one that exposes the discursive constraints of conventional historiography.

Together, the concepts of magical supplementation and defamiliarization offer a robust critical lens through which to examine *Dreams of Maryam Tair*. The two strategies constitute insurgent modes of knowledge that challenge dominant frameworks of meaning-making. Magical supplementation reclaims occluded histories and suppressed cosmologies, offering a reparative counter-narrative that privileges memory, myth, and feminine epistemologies. In parallel, defamiliarization destabilizes normative perception by making the familiar strange in order to expose the ideological scaffolding of power, whether colonial, patriarchal, or institutional. As this theoretical framework suggests, Mhani Alaoui's novel does not merely represent resistance; it performs it formally, ontologically, and politically. The outcome is a compelling act of re-worlding that opens new ways of sensing, knowing, and narrating the world.

Embodied Resistance Through Magical Supplementation

The following section analyzes three central figures in *Dreams of Maryam Tair*—Maryam, Zohra, and Sheherazade—as agents of magical feminist resistance. Each is imbued with distinct, though sometimes overlapping, magical attributes that reclaim silenced genealogies, subvert patriarchal historiography, and assert alternative ontologies. Maryam's textual transformation renders her an embodied archive of feminist insurgency; Zohra, the revolutionary witch, anchors oral memory and subaltern pedagogy; and Sheherazade, the metafictional narrator, reconfigures storytelling as a sacred and subversive act. Collectively, the three characters enact a core imperative of magical feminism: the reclamation of myth, body, memory, and voice through ontological disruption.

Maryam: The Magical Text

Maryam is the novel's axial grammar of resistance, rupture, and remembrance. She permits the mobilization of various magical elements to incorporate suppressed epistemologies, especially those grounded in feminine pain, memory, and myth. Maryam functions as both character and code, more than body and scent. She is "the completed becoming of the text" (Alaoui 339). From her emergence into the world, handicapped and "conceived in darkness and fear" (Alaoui 114), Maryam is constructed as a threshold figure, situated between presence and absence, trauma and myth. Her very name, "with a multiplicity of meanings" (Alaoui 114), destabilizes static identity. Alaoui defines her as "rebel, bitterness, loved one, killer, saint, guardian" (Alaoui 114). These contradictions remain unresolved, allowing Maryam to be a polysemic portal for submerged histories and a magical conduit for individual and collective memory.

Maryam's fantastic liminality is further materialized through her scent, a continuous trail of orange blossoms that serves as both an aesthetic trace and a force of resistance within the narrative. When Mehdi is held captive in the nightmarish prison of Birsoukout, it is the scent that catalyzes his salvation by suffocating the bureaucratic jailer (Alaoui 144). The same fragrance fills others with "a delightful, singing serenity" (Alaoui 114). The olfactory mark invokes Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, a bodily, affective mode of signification that resists containment within phallocentric logic. The orange scent acts directly on sensory

and psychic registers, dismantling structures of control and inscribing resistance through the body (Cixous 875–880).

Just as her scent maps an alternate sensory grammar, Maryam's enchanted mobility extends her marvelous resistance across space. She rides her magical bicycle, "'Aoud Errih,' or 'Wind-Rider,'" a rusty, moody bike imbued with a soul and personality (Alaoui 167–68), while she navigates the Moroccan terrain with dreamlike grace. The movement dissolves the division between memory and geography, rewriting the landscape through her motion. Her trauma-saturated body becomes a cartographic force that reclaims erased spaces. In Susan Stanford Friedman's terms, Maryam enacts feminist geography: "to move is to resist stasis, to rewrite the map" (28).

This rewriting is part and parcel of her ancestral mythos. Maryam is revealed to be the daughter of Leila, a descendant of Lilith, and Adam, the archetypal patriarch afflicted with forgetfulness. "No one can deny now that Adam had a first wife… and together they had a daughter called Maryam" (Alaoui 321). Like her mother, she "was demonized" for being "too proud, too free" (333). Alaoui reclaims the Lilith myth, long vilified for resisting male authority, and embeds it into Maryam's matrilineal genealogy. The revision undermines the monologic structure of the Abrahamic narrative and re-centers the feminine as sacred origin. Maryam becomes heir to a cosmology once erased, now inscribed anew.

Her radical lineage underpins the political violence inflicted on her body and identity. Maryam's queer embodiment, marked by her refusal of marriage, motherhood, and heterosexuality, exemplifies what Ikram Ben Talha and Barhoun, in the context of Moroccan feminist writing, describe as the repression of gender and sexual dissidence. Their analysis identifies the "inscription of multiple identities in conflict with their body, sexuality, and social context" (2). Maryam's nonconformity thus turns out to be the basis for her indictment, culminating in a symbolic trial at the Grand Tribunal:

> "Death:
> for perverting our sacrosanct history,
> for desecrating the Holy Book and the story of our prophet Adam, his one wife, Eve and their children Cain and Abel,
> for doubting the divine right of the Great Patriarch to rule the land,
> for wanting equal inheritance and marriage laws,
> for feeling outrage where submission is scripture,
> for saying no,
> for being a homosexual,
> for refusing to marry,
> for refusing to have children,
> for wanting to be an individual,
> for reinterpreting good and right,
> for saying no,
> for being provocative,
> for being subversive,
> for saying yes to secularism,
> for saying yes to freedom,
> for saying yes to choice." (Alaoui 270–271)

The state's attempt at erasure paradoxically becomes the crucible of Maryam's transformation, gesturing toward liberation from what Ben Talha and Barhoun designate as "the social and cultural structures that generate claustrophobia of the body" (10). In a courtroom filled with identical mirror-faced judges (Alaoui 337), Maryam turns a moment of annihilation into a

revelation: "She touches her arms, neck, and face and feels… words. She looks at herself and finds that she is no longer herself… She has transformed into something other…. She is no longer flesh and bone, she is word and meaning" (339).

The transformation is not metaphorical but metaphysical. Maryam ceases to be a discrete character and becomes the story's very language, its alternative history. "She is the child, the manuscript, the resistance" (Alaoui 339). The scene literalizes Hegerfeldt's claim that magical realism "revalues figurative language as a mode of thought" (238) and fulfills Cixous's exhortation that women "write themselves" into being: "Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (880). Maryam's textual body asserts that rebellion, healing, and knowledge arise not despite pain, but through it.

Maryam's story concludes with ascension. Rising above the courtroom to merge with the stars, moons, and planets (Alaoui 340), Maryam calls out: "Mother, be at peace. You may rest, for you have made me safe… Who can deny love when they find it?" (Alaoui 340). Her becoming merges the personal, the mythic, and the political; she becomes the archive and the force that propels its circulation.

The novel closes with Sheherazade watching her successor depart: "You are Maryam Tair, and now your tale is told… You are revealed, Al-Batina, hidden and revealed… But the stars and moons and planets alone know how I will miss you, my beloved daughter" (Alaoui 340). In this final moment, Alaoui dissolves the boundary between manuscript and myth, evoking the timeless power of narrative to resist oblivion. As Faris observes, "In Scheherazade's tales … language takes on magical properties to light up the nights verging on nightmares" ("Scheherazade's Children" 163). The same holds true for *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, where storytelling becomes a luminous act of defiance against patriarchal darkness.

Maryam's magical rebellion is not a singular act but a generative diffusion, inked into memory and carried forward through narrative. Like representative magical realist characters Beloved, Tita, or Scheherazade herself, Maryam survives by virtue of transmission and the embodied, resisting force of story.

Zohra: Revolutionary Witch and Matriarch of Subversive Memory

Zohra of the Ait Daoud deepens *Dreams of Maryam Tair*'s commitment to feminist magical supplementation as insurgent pedagogy and epistemological recovery. A roughly 200-year-old revolutionary witch, Zohra is "fed on resistance" (Alaoui 62). Her life is stitched together from the seams of oral history, ritual magic, matriarchal inheritance, and working-class solidarity. Raised in the Central Quarries, Casablanca's most infamous slum, Zohra's shack becomes a womb of radical re-creation. The Central Quarries functions as both a geographical and symbolic center of resistance, a space where "things brought to die breathed life anew" (Alaoui 33). Speaking of her Ait Daoud tribe, descended from ancient Hebrews and Muslim saints, Zohra says: "There, in that magical, mystical land, everyone is a Sharif, rebellion is a way of life, and the outlaw is protected" (Alaoui 34). She is a living archive whose body, spells, and speech destabilize colonial, patriarchal, and epistemic hierarchies.

Zohra's witchcraft is not illusion but radical hermeneutics. When still a child, she steals and disassembles the sacred Green Book, an allegorical stand-in for male-dominated religious text, asserting a subversive claim over language and meaning. "Though she was made to kneel in penance… it was too late, for her mind had already taken in the book's symbols and signs" (Alaoui 37). From this act emerges her unique magical practice: pulling apart sacred text to reassemble it into talismans. "She conjured magic by dismantling the text, cutting words and

sentences out, creating fury out of order" (37). The talismans, inscribed with the very symbols of patriarchal power, become tools for both healing and disruption, an aesthetic and political transformation of language into force. Zohra's textual alchemy embodies a refusal of imposed silence and the reclamation of the female voice as spellwork. To this effect, Gloria Anzaldúa affirms, "I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (59).

Like Maryam, part of Zohra's irreducible magicality lies in her inhabiting a hybrid space:

> She was the kind of woman people go to in times of trouble, but one they chose to avoid. A beggar, a prostitute, perhaps even a rebel or a thief, who would want her? Zeinab, the Nassiri maid, had prepared the small room at the back of the house for this woman who was neither guest nor servant, for this woman they wanted to remain invisible. (Alaoui 61)

Her refusal to marry, her fluid sexuality, and her unapologetic corporeality render her grotesque to some and divine to others. She is rumored to be "Aisha Kandisha" herself, the mythic seductress who lures men to doom (Alaoui 38). Even as her neighbor spits, "You will die and be forgotten like the ugly witch you are," Zohra does not look back (39). She embraces her excess, burping and praying in a dance "between light and dark, sleep and awakening" (62). In this threshold state, Zohra enacts what Anzaldúa terms "borderlands consciousness," a mestiza sensibility forged at the interstices of difference. "The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity…. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode" (79). Zohra's life unfolds between binaries: urban and tribal, sacred and vulgar, mother and monster. She resists categorical belonging and rejoices in multiplicity. Her world is not governed by morality, or its opposite, but by the messy ethics of desire, revenge, survival, and relishing that pleasure of flight on her broomstick, that "forbidden, universal gift of the witch" (Alaoui 196).

Still in the spirit of Anzaldúa's "new mestiza," Zohra participates in the making of "another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet" (103). Her pedagogy is oral, affective, and spectral. She is both character and symbol: witch, trickster, matriarch, and revolutionary. Her healing is charged with political consequence. Her talismans come with warnings: "a talisman once made could unleash both good and evil" (Alaoui 37); she is the one "for whom society's codes are at a loss and risk breaking" (61). A figure of feminist magical realism, she performs what Barhoun qualifies as the unnerving of "the world of classic identity and knowledge" by testing "the very limits … of being itself" ("The Carnivalesque" 45). Remarkably, Zohra does not just survive history; she rewrites it.

One of Zohra's most potent magical interventions unfolds within the realm of dreams. Invoking Ben Okri's concluding declaration in *The Famished Road* that "a dream can be the highest point of a life," Zohra's dream becomes a stage of magical-political intervention. She enters the demons' lair disguised as a bureaucrat to rescue Leila, turning the machinery of the state against itself: "Zohra—dream-Zohra—was now a soberly dressed bureaucrat who ordered the immediate release of one Leila Nassiri Tair" (Alaoui 33). Elsa Linguanti et al. corroborate this idea, arguing that "dream … is itself action" (189). Hence, Zohra's spectral intercession becomes a feminist rewriting of power, where imagination turns into praxis.

Zohra's ultimate act of magical supplementation takes shape in her surrender of the cedarwood box, "the heritage of Solomon and Sheeba" (Alaoui 248), to the butterfly tribe, the Idaid. This magical-political sacrifice costs Zohra her life but catalyzes Maryam's reception of the gift of thought. When she gives up the ancestral treasure, Zohra enacts an insurgent pedagogy where power is not hoarded but transmitted at great personal cost. The loss of the box

seems to be the inevitable price of epistemic rebirth, positioning Zohra as both martyr and midwife of revolutionary consciousness. In this sense, her death is not an unmitigated tragedy but the necessary rupture from which insurgent knowledge is born (Barhoun, "The Carnivalesque" 47). In the spirit of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, her death becomes a source of vital regenerative power, echoing the festive-ritual ambivalence of "the wish for death" and, through it, "a wish for renewal and rebirth: die, and live again" (Bakhtin 245–49).

Sheherazade: Narrative as Magical Supplement and Feminist Ontology

Among the constellation of magical agents in *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, Sheherazade is the novel's most mythically and metafictionally charged figure. Drawing from her patrimony in *The Arabian Nights*, Alaoui assigns her the role of a radical narrator. The insurgent matriarch wields storytelling as a feminist mode of survival and resistance. Faris observes, "Scheherazade herself is a popular paradigm of the high modernist narrator—exhausted and threatened by death, but still inventing" ("Scheherazade's Children" 163). Alaoui extends this model, converting storytelling from literary performance to an ontological act of persistence in the face of epistemic and state violence. Sheherazade's role is profoundly intertextual, recalling Clarissa Pinkola Estés's claim that "within every woman there is a wild and natural force, a power, that when awakened will transform the world" (34). Alaoui's Sheherazade smokes her pipe in the Atlas Mountains, critiques the digital age's encroachment on oral memory, names madness her "prized possession," and embraces it as a "tool" to wage "a war against omniscience" (Alaoui 247).

Madness, in cultural and literary discourse, has long been deployed to discredit women's voices and suppress forms of female dissent. Meriem Ait Bbih and Barhoun observe that "patriarchal institutions... are known to associate women with madness as a strategy to curb their agency and limit their subjectivity" (2). In *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, Alaoui reclaims this trope through Sheherazade, who harnesses madness to destabilize the dominion of the "Great Patriarch" and his patrimony. Rather than signaling a lapse in reason, her madness is meant to be a form of embodied knowledge, rooted in emotion, memory, and ancestral wisdom, that challenges dominant frameworks of rationality. Ait Bbih and Barhoun contend that totalizing systems of knowledge are "deeply troubled by anything which reason/rationality cannot neatly contain or control" (5). In opposing such systems, Sheherazade resists both nationalist and Western patriarchal paradigms that deny multiplicity and marginal voices. Madness, in her hands, transforms into a magical feminist agency that reimagines suppressed cosmologies and alternate ways of knowing into being.

Sheherazade gives Maryam the gift of "heart," a metaphor for moral clarity and affective power, thereby rewriting the conventional arc of the magical guide. She is not only Maryam's narrator but also her midwife and interlocutor, guiding her along a process of transformation that is both ontological and narrative. Her storytelling resists linearity and closure, becoming "a model of magical realist narration: digressive, layered, resistant to authority" (Faris, "Scheherazade's Children" 164). Sheherazade enacts resistance through form—tales within tales, voices within voices—producing a magical supplementation that defies fixity and invites participation.

Furthermore, Sheherazade's dialogic engagement with Maryam, Zohra, Leila, and the unnamed apprentice demonstrates the generative potential of feminist mentorship in magical realist fiction. It is not a pedagogy of hierarchy but of relational transmission. Sheherazade curates narrative inheritance as an ethical act. Her final proclamation, "You are Maryam Tair,

and now your tale is told. It was told to you, for you, and with you" (Alaoui 340), collapses the boundaries between author, character, and reader. This culminates in what might be called a moment of intersectional legibility: a narrative space where layered identities, often peripheral ones, are recognized and affirmed. Overlooking the intersection of race, gender, and class renders the experiences of marginalized women invisible within dominant discourse (Crenshaw 1241). Sheherazade's magical narrative form defies such erasure by privileging multiplicity, embodiment, and intersubjectivity.

Ultimately, Sheherazade stands as a mythic supplement to Maryam's journey and to the very possibility of feminist futurity. She is a recursive force who reactivates forgotten genealogies and restores storytelling as a radical, relational practice. Her function extends beyond narration to metaphysics. Rather than simply preserve the story, she transforms it into a living archive, an insurgent grammar of magical feminist becoming.

Defamiliarizing Violence: Rewriting History Through Estrangement

While the previous section examines magical feminist resistance through the delineation of three marvelous characters, this section turns to narrative form, specifically Alaoui's use of defamiliarization as a strategy of ontological disruption and historical recovery. In *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, defamiliarization renders reality strange in order to expose the hidden operations of power. It performs a radical mode of historiographic intervention that reconfigures urban memory, critiques gendered carceral systems, and exposes the monstrosity of state violence. The subsections that follow analyze how Alaoui rewrites urban space and prison architecture through magical realist estrangement, producing what can be read as counter-archives of feminist and queer resistance.

Rewriting the Urban Archive

In *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, Mhani Alaoui defamiliarizes urban Morocco, employing magical realism politically to recover occluded history. Her estranged depictions of Casablanca during the 1981 Bread Riots and the Arab Spring disrupt realist expectations and habitual modes of perception, reframing official historiography through the lens of embodied trauma, mythic time, and affective rupture. Magical realism, in this context, becomes a counter-discourse that distorts causality and produces what Hegerfeldt calls "strategies of destabilization," thus forcing readers to renegotiate their frameworks for understanding historical reality (199). In such cases, "a mere matter-of-fact description of cruelty and violence is not in itself sufficient to convey a sense of horror," so a defamiliarized aesthetic is required (Hegerfeldt 209).

On the eve of the Bread Riots, Casablanca is a spectral and decaying landscape, haunted by time and political neglect:

> Casablanca was a city of shades and shadows aspiring toward forgetfulness and dreamless sleep. Already, since that morning, the cracks on the elegant prewar buildings had deepened, and an ashen residue had settled on the facades. In a matter of hours, a dark green moss had grown on the newly formed crevasses. Soft and inviting from afar, the decaying Centre Ville had aged a hundred years in one day. (Alaoui 6)

The temporal and spatial estrangement literalizes the psychic effects of political repression and historical forgetting.

When violence erupts, the state's coercive apparatus transforms to monstrous figures, turning the riot into an apocalyptic spectacle:

> Leila watched as the central plaza became an arena of violence. A fog descended on the plaza. The sky swirled into a dark grey cloud, and the air thickened… They burned, crushed, and ate whatever they found.… With their massive fists, they hit children, killed with glee, and disappeared men and women into their white vans. The demons grabbed protesters and, flapping their wings of dank wool, rose with them into the sky. (Alaoui 15)

The grotesque eruption is a "defamiliarization brought about by the literalization of metaphor" (Hegerfeldt 237). Alaoui replaces empirical realism with surreal horror to recast state violence in estranged and viscerally felt terms. Hegerfeldt notes that "extreme events call for a treatment that takes their deviance into account," producing "a tension which expresses that the events in question are beyond all belief" (209) and evoking "a paradoxical sense of unreality" engendered by "utterly inconceivable dimensions of human cruelty" (331). This aesthetic move aligns with John Burt Foster's concept of "felt history," whereby a character absorbs the direct pressure of historical events and their dramatic psychic toll (274). The portrayal of the demonic purge during the Bread Riots breaks the linearity of history through emotional temporality, unsettling the teleological structure of official memory and recoding violence by means of affective and symbolic registers.

The same strategy is deployed in the novel's depiction of the Arab Spring, which is not witnessed through news media or rational discourse but sensed as a metaphysical disturbance. From a rooftop in Fes, Maryam and Zohra perceive the revolution in the form of a cosmic shift:

> "Do you see it too, Maryam?" Zohra urged. Maryam nodded, "I felt it. Now I am beginning to see it." A sound like rolling thunder could be heard in the distance. The noise was getting closer, as wave upon wave of protesting men and women, young and poor, hit the narrow streets. "The people have nothing left to lose," said Zohra. (Alaoui 182)

Here, Alaoui collapses linear time into visionary simultaneity, revealing the revolution to be an emotional and temporal dislocation. This supernaturalization of the real offers "idiosyncratic recreations of … events grounded firmly in historical realities, often alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts" (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 15).

Alaoui thereby constructs a history that is both descriptive and imaginative, one that decenters conventional renderings and challenges the presumed authority of empiricism in defining historical truth. Zohra and Maryam become mediums through whom history is refracted, blending fact with myth and reportage with dream. In a similar context, Zhu Ying notes, "the novel's historical field is extensively enveloped in a mythic frame" (118). The Arab Spring is not merely narrated but divined. In Alaoui's hands, magical realism becomes a visionary historiography, where the mystical, affective, and insurgent converge to reclaim urban space and collective memory from state-sanctioned accounts.

The Demons' Lair: Temporal Abyss and Gendered Torture

The demons' lair, in which Leila and Adam are imprisoned, suspends empirical logic: "Three months… translated to a thousand and one years in the demons' lair" (Alaoui 31). This temporal

dissonance, where "[Adam's] hair was long and white, and he looked a thousand and one years old" (29), concretizes the emotional dilation of trauma. Such distortion mirrors the necro-temporal condition of prison life in state-engineered abysses designed to erase time itself. Spatially, too, the lair embodies an architecture of despair. "The lair was a labyrinth of stone and steel" (29), and Leila and Adam are described as separated by an "eternity across the sea of darkness and into a lunar mountain range" (30), a mythic metaphor that collapses carceral space into psychic alienation.

It is within this setting that the demons perpetrate their monstrous sexual assaults on Leila. The narrative avoids a realist depiction of the episode, instead abstracting the violence into poetic horror: "Leila … remained our prey for many a long night. A moment of suspended violence, of pure pleasure upon which we fed our crimson delight … Her destruction must be complete" (Alaoui 208). By veiling sexual torture in metaphor, the narrative acknowledges that certain forms of suffering exceed the limits of forensic realism. Alaoui employs a defamiliarizing mode of narration to convey the emotional and bodily truth of trauma while eschewing spectacle or sensationalism. In line with this ethic, Saidiya Hartman warns that the challenge is to represent the violated body without violating it again (3). Eventually, Alaoui's figurative language does not obscure; it actively resists discursive violence.

Adam, meanwhile, is reduced to a metaphysical husk:

> Adam stood beside Leila feeling as old as the world and looking almost as tired. He was a shell licked clean by the demons in the lair. They had gleefully hollowed him out and thrown him to the void. He had not had a single dream since he had been returned. His nights were filled with dreamlessness, and he was left to face the demons, now in full view, forever in front of his pupils. (Alaoui 57)

This evocative image expresses the existential outcome of the prison experience. In fact, both prisoners are subdued through the administration of "poisonous lead," whose grip on them "was now acute" (Alaoui 95), a signifier for permanent ideological and psychological coercion. "It transformed its prey into quiet, unobtrusive beings who went gently through life and let their days crumble into their smallest components without ever puzzling about their meaning" (60). In this light, Alaoui critiques authoritarianism's most insidious mechanisms: numbness, routinization, and psychic dismemberment:

> [The guards] would watch and wait for that moment when the individual would break and the soul would be taken…. They would watch for days and longer days … but all in vain. They would persevere, and their perseverance would pay off. After a lengthy, doubt-filled wait, the prisoner would finally break. There was even a couple they had freed to serve as an example to other hot-headed, naïve idealists. (Alaoui 206)

The psychological disintegration described in the passage echoes what human rights discourse terms psychological torture: the "prolonged mental harm" caused by methods "calculated to disrupt profoundly the senses or personality" (Reyes 597). Such torture erodes autonomy, engenders guilt, and shatters identity. Alaoui's depiction of prisoners who are broken down over time, who dissolve into quiet compliance, aligns with the documented goal of psychological torture: to dismantle the will, leading to a total "disintegration of the personality" (Reyes 600).

Thematically, the lair functions as a gendered counterpoint to Tazmamart and similar infamous prisons. Whereas testimonies of Tazmamart focus largely on masculine political victimhood, Alaoui's feminized carceral imaginary expands the archive of pain into the terrain of patriarchal and state-authored gendered violence, stressing that "[Leila's] suffering was much greater than Adam's" (Alaoui 29). This gendered amplification of suffering resonates

with the feminist criminological imperative to center women's political incarceration within "affective testimony" and "bodily lived experience" as critical tools for understanding carceral violence (Chamberlen and Bandyopadhyay 11).

Alaoui's representation of Leila's degradation through symbolic and somatic registers reflects Anastasia Chamberlen and Mahuya Bandyopadhyay's account of "the disciplining, control, and punitive actions inscribed on the body of the woman prisoner" (10). Moreover, by linking rape, erasure, and psychic ruin to state and patriarchal authority, the novel takes up the two authors' call to confront the "invisibility … of women's … incarceration" (3). Alaoui's depiction of the lair critiques a carceral logic that fractures female subjectivity, much like Chamberlen and Bandyopadhyay's indictment of patriarchal penal systems. The lair becomes a feminist site of exposure which reveals how gendered state violence is etched into memory, language, and flesh.

Birsoukout: Queer Erasure and Carceral Silence

If the lair dramatizes psychic collapse, Birsoukout—literally "the Well of Silence"—enacts epistemic annihilation. It is the culmination of Alaoui's magical realist logic, where metaphor becomes matter and absence is rendered through state architecture:

> The place seemed deserted. The air was too still. Maryam felt the brightness in her heart begin to drain away ... She wondered why the stillness and deserted aspect of the place filled her with such sadness. It was like no place she had ever been to ... The silence was not a full-bodied, heavy one. Instead, it was a silence made of emptiness. (Alaoui 182)

To this secret prison, "whose mere name brought terror to people's hearts and made heroes frail" (181), Mehdi, a queer dissident, is brought to be punished for an act of imagination: "He dreamed the destruction of our absolute power" (Alaoui 177). In Alaoui's political cosmology, dreaming itself is treasonous, a form of insurgent power, recalling Salim's psychic resistance in Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light*. Salim declares: "I strove to keep my mind out of reach" (Ben Jelloun 104).

Similar to the literary afterlives of Tazmamart, Birsoukout transforms disappearance into an ontological void where silence is a "business of producing nothingness" (Alaoui 182). Alaoui's "arid silence" (182) invites a dark side of magical realism; it is not a byproduct of repression, but its very mechanism.

The silence at Birsoukout is both physical and archival. Mehdi incarnates "the ontological negation" (Sharpe 16), the fate of those whom "the state positions to die ungrievable deaths and live lives meant to be unlivable" (Sharpe 22). Mehdi's queerness thus places him beyond the horizon of public recognition, aligning Birsoukout with Years of Lead's political prisons, where "knowledge of what cannot be admitted fosters even more silence" (El Guabli 119). Indeed, Birsoukout is a mythic equivalent to actual political prisons and detention centers such as Qalaat M'Gouna and Derb Moulay Cherif, black holes that disappeared those marked by nonconformity. These sites remained outside the narrative logic of justice and accountability to systematically repress opposition. "Birsoukout lingered in that repressed domain of our beings and our societies, existing to stifle rebelliousness," Alaoui writes (169).

The annihilation in Birsoukout is bureaucratically managed by the prison's spectral warden: the scribe. Neither torturer nor executioner, the scribe enacts a peculiar form of archival

violence: typing incessantly onto a blank sheet of paper, he constructs the very borders of visibility and erasure. He is "the creator of borders and margins" (Alaoui 196). His role incarnates a silent, administrative sovereignty that denies the body even the dignity of trace, making Birsoukout an instance of what Achille Mbembe calls the calculated reorganization of survival: a politics that governs not by killing outright, but by rendering some lives unrecordable. Mbembe contends that sovereignty manifests spatially through "the writing of new spatial relations," the drawing of "boundaries and hierarchies," and the relegation of certain groups to new zones of existence (79). Birsoukout thus stands for a sovereign space of epistemic exile. There, the queer, dissident body is confined to the margins of recognizability, spectrally disappeared through the technics of silence and administration. Explained by El Guabli, the secret prison becomes "an unbridled manifestation not only of the state's ability to erase people from the surface of the earth, but also to deny that they ever existed" (11).

When Maryam confronts "the dead scribe" (Alaoui 186), she shatters his dominion through presence and writing. "Move away from me. Your smell is disgusting, impure. It is...alive," complains the scribe (Alaoui 186). Maryam's scent signifies a subversive vitality that perturbs the sterile logic of the state. More crucially, her presence catalyzes a breach in the scribe's spell: "letters and words began to appear on the blank piece of paper, and the nothingness dissipated to reveal the agony beneath" (Alaoui 186). As Stephanie Galasso posits, "reclaiming the means of representation is the first act of resistance in the face of epistemic violence" (71). Maryam's presence literalizes this act, rendering the invisible visible and the silenced heard.

Nevertheless, what Maryam's incursion into Birsoukout reveals is equally significant:

> Maryam watched as light became shade and shadows replaced the emptiness. Forms began to step out of the darkness. Though they walked and surely breathed, they showed no other signs of life. Their heads hung low, and their clothes floated on their emaciated bodies. They were neither chained nor whipped nor controlled in any way that she could see. (Alaoui 186)

It is a scene of prisoners in spiritual depletion. They are present, breathing, yet emptied of vitality. Their bodies are untouched by instruments of physical control, but their postures betray complete obedience. The absence of overt violence is not evidence of freedom; it is a sophisticated marker of submission. In Michel Foucault's words:

> Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process…: it leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity. (9)

The bodies before Maryam bear no visible wounds because the punishment they endure no longer operates through flesh; it is enacted via a sustained regime of psychic domination, a colonization of the soul. Another of Foucault's formulations is chillingly apt here: "The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (30).

In Birsoukout, the state achieves its most terrifying ambition. The prisoners are disciplined into "subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (Foucault 138), with no chains or whips being required. They are free to move, yet their will is extinguished. These zombie-like figures are molded by certainty, subdued by the unrelenting pressure of a power that hides its operations yet leaves nothing untouched. The bureaucratic demons themselves admit, "We miss nothing. We are trained in thoroughness. We leave nothing to chance, no stone unturned" (320).

In this way, both the lair and Birsoukout are revealed as continuums of Morocco's real carceral history, transfigured through defamiliarization into critical counter-sites of memory.

Alaoui's novel thereby contributes to the broader project of what El Guabli terms "fictionalized other-archives" (133), not only documenting repressive structures but remaking them within symbolic topographies that challenge the forgetfulness imposed by official historiography.

Conclusion

In *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms*, Mhani Alaoui offers a powerful intervention into feminist theory, postcolonial critique, and magical realism. Through formal innovation and mythopoeic characters, Alaoui reclaims narrative as both an ontological and political act, where resistance is not merely represented but structurally enacted. The novel illustrates Arab magical feminism, expanding the epistemic and aesthetic boundaries of magical realism while challenging the exclusions that have historically defined its canon.

Central to Alaoui's narrative is the strategic use of magical supplementation and defamiliarization. Together, the devices unsettle Western realist assumptions and legitimize marginalized, spiritual, and embodied ways of knowing. Magical supplementation resists metaphorical reduction, affirming mythic and sacred truths as coexistent with empirical reality; defamiliarization, by estranging the ordinary, exposes its ideological contours and reactivates our perception of trauma, violence, and power. The two techniques form a counter-discursive grammar that redefines what can be known, narrated, and believed.

This logic is embodied most forcefully in Alaoui's characters. Maryam, the novel's cosmological and narrative center, performs a magical feminist ontology through her fluid identity, mythic ancestry, and final transformation into text. Her enchanted bicycle, matrilineal heritage, and sacred scent challenge patriarchal hegemony, asserting the divine feminine as a mode of knowledge. In becoming word and meaning, she literalizes the act of women writing themselves into being, echoing Cixous and other theorists who view the female body as archive and insurgency.

Zohra, the revolutionary witch of the Central Quarries, deepens the novel's radical epistemology through embodied pedagogy and linguistic sabotage. Her talismanic craft, forged from dismantled patriarchal texts, carries out symbolic resistance on one hand and material reordering on the other. Grotesque and divine, maternal and monstrous, Zohra embodies Anzaldúa's borderlands consciousness, embracing ambiguity as a political stance. Her final act is not death but transmission, a magical inheritance that enables Maryam's becoming. Midwife and martyr alike, she becomes a conduit for subversive knowledge.

Sheherazade, the metafictional narrator, anchors the novel within a transhistorical lineage of feminist storytelling. Reclaimed from patriarchal folklore, she is the narrator of counter-hegemonic cosmologies. Her nonlinear, digressive narration privileges affect, memory, and relational ways of knowing. Her gift of heart to Maryam signifies an ethics of care that resists authoritarian logic. In her final benediction, she collapses the boundaries between narrator, character, and reader, forming a dialogic community held together by the political power of storytelling.

These women are not isolated figures but nodes in an interwoven network of magical, feminine forces that resists erasure and rewrites history. Their stories unfold in estranged urban landscapes and carceral spaces transformed by Alaoui into sites of affective, spiritual, and political remapping. Casablanca during the Bread Riots and the Arab Spring, the demons' lair, and Birsoukout become terrains in which magical realism engages with Morocco's Years of Lead and recovers silenced voices. These haunted spaces, which are marked by temporal rupture and spectral violence, insist that history is not the one written by official institutions but

the one lived through bodies, dreams, and ancestral language. In this way, the novel constitutes an other-archive rooted in sacred femininity and anti-authoritarian imagination.

Dreams of Maryam Tair is not simply a feminist novel using magical realism; it is a magical feminist text that remakes narrative, ontology, and knowledge itself in the image of resistance. Alaoui repositions Arab women's writing at the heart of global magical realist discourse, challenging its geographic and ideological boundaries. Her novel contributes to a transnational, pluriversal aesthetic capable of articulating pain, power, and possibility. In doing so, she affirms storytelling as a reparative act against forgetting and a luminous invocation of worlds yet to be born.

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The Representation of the Arab Spring in the U.S. Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Sara Rguig
Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Laboratory

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Sara Rguig is currently an Associate Professor of English at the National School of Applied Sciences (ENSATE), Abdelmalek Essaâdi University in Tetouan, Morocco. She is a permanent member of the LLCIS Research Laboratory at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Martil. She holds a Doctorate in Linguistics, Communication, and Translation from Abdelmalek Essaâdi University. Her research interests include critical discourse analysis, media studies, linguistics, teaching methodologies, and ICT integration, as well as gender studies. She is the author of several publications related to these fields. She values interdisciplinary collaboration and actively welcomes opportunities to work across diverse research areas.

srguig@uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7927-875X

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Sara Rguig
Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Laboratory

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the Arab Spring was represented in U.S. print media, specifically in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It explores how discursive strategies and linguistic devices used by journalists reflect ideological biases, particularly the persistence of Orientalist thought. The analysis identifies recurring themes such as the depiction of violence in the Arab world (negative other-representation), Islamophobia (Islam as a threat), and the assertion of Western superiority (positive self-representation). These patterns suggest that media coverage reinforces long-standing stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, portraying them as irrational, violent, and culturally inferior. By contrast, the West—especially the United States—is constructed as rational, civilized, and morally superior. Drawing on CDA methodologies proposed by Teun A. van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, and Ruth Wodak, the study argues that such representations are not neutral but are ideologically driven and aligned with U.S. foreign policy interests. The findings reveal how news discourse constructs and legitimizes unequal power relations and contributes to the production of in-group (West) versus out-group (Arabs/Muslims) identities. Ultimately, the paper calls for ethical journalism that fosters intercultural dialogue and challenges biased media practices.

KEYWORDS

Critical Discourse Analysis

Media

Arab Spring

U.S. Newspapers

Introduction

On December 17, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old Tunisian street vendor, set himself on fire in a show of public protest against the police who removed his produce cart. Protests broke out on the same day in Sidi Bouzid, increasing quickly to other cities. The uprisings were named the Jasmine Revolution, which caused disorder in Tunisia and ultimately led to the resignation of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Subsequently, a series of anti-government protests spread across several Arab countries, which the global press dubbed the "Arab Spring." The first use of the phrase 'Arab Spring' to refer to the Arab uprisings was by an article published in an American political journal. According to Joseph Massad, the choice of the term was not accidental but "rather a US strategy of controlling their aims and goals" (Massad). In fact, the term "Arab Spring" was coined by Western media in early 2011, referring to the 1968 Prague Spring, a period of political liberalization and mass protest in Czechoslovakia, a communist state, following World War II. The so-called Prague Spring restructurings were an effort to grant citizens additional rights through partial decentralization of the economy and democratization, amid the country's domination by the Soviet Union. However, the case in the Arab region is highly different. The belief was that the Arab Spring was a political uprising by

Contact ✉ srguig@uae.ac.ma
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masses demanding a liberal democratic reform, and that these uprisings would cause a wide political change across the Arab world; however, the results were rather unexpected.

In fact, the outcomes of the Arab Spring do not correspond to the so-called Prague Spring. The latter was a top-down path, starting from members of the regime. In contrast, the uprisings in the Arab World were rather popular revolts that ended in an unanticipated way. "Social change and revolutions across history, always born out of fundamental crises, surprise the world when they happen, and their aftermath usually seems unpredictable. The Arab Spring uprisings validate this tried and true – albeit seldom recalled – history lesson" (Eid and Douai 1). According to political scientists, the societies impacted will face difficulties as they navigate the transition to unpredictable futures, with various political and social forces attempting to shape the new political landscape. Some challenges are likely to be significant, as democratic transitions do not always succeed, and violence often results in ongoing civil unrest (Rex et al. 2000; Maboudi 2022).

Although the Arab Spring received extensive global media coverage, the events in the Arab world were covered by Western media more thoroughly than ever before. Accordingly, this paper aims to examine the representation of the Arab Spring in American media. More specifically, it focuses on texts in news articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The article examines principally from a Critical Discourse Analysis approach how journalists employ discursive strategies[1], which may serve their own ideology[2] and agenda in their news coverage of the Arab Spring. In other words, the objective of this study is to reveal explicit and implicit meanings in news reports in terms of linguistic devices and rhetorical tropes that journalists use to represent Arabs and Muslims during the Arab Spring.

The choice of the Arab Spring as the temporal setting and historical background for this research is significant given that the event marks one of the most important political and social developments in the Arab world. Actually, the Arab Spring has attracted the special interest of many scholars, researchers, and specialists from various domains. Numerous studies have been conducted on the Arab Spring from different perspectives. Some works offer a historical context perspective analysis of the Arab Spring, demonstrating how the Arab revolutions have developed and spread from one country to another. Other works focus on the role of the U.S. administration in the Arab Spring; essentially, a considerable amount of scholarly research pays attention to the United States' reaction to the Arab Spring and the strategies adopted by the Obama Administration to deal with the uprisings. Alternatively, numerous studies focus on the role of social media in mobilizing those collective actions. Yet, there are relatively few or no studies that deal with the media representation of the Arab Spring, particularly the American imprint media, from a Critical Discourse Analysis standpoint. For instance, Michael D. Bruce and Othman Mohamed Othman Alshareif conducted two different studies on the media framing of the Arab Spring, yet focusing only on the visual coverage. Othman Alshareif's work (2016) investigates how the Arab and Western media affected the staff and students of one Libyan university through their presentation of the major Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. His thesis concentrates on the reporting by *Al-Jazeera* and the *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC). Michael D. Bruce, on the other hand, conducted a systematic comparative analysis on visual coverage of the civil unrest in Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, and Syria; from five transnational satellite news channels that broadcast to/from the Arab world—*Al Jazeera*, *Al Jazeera English*, *Al Arabiya*, *Alhurra*, and *BBC Arabic*. In contrast, Stefanie Ullmann delves deeply into the linguistic and metaphorical frameworks used across various media narratives, employing Discourse Analysis to uncover the ideologies and power dynamics present in both Western and Arab contexts. However, the study does not explicitly focus on American imprint media or analyze how these narratives uniquely shape public perception in

the United States. Its broad comparative approach examines a variety of media outlets without isolating the distinct narratives that arise within American coverage.

Hence, this makes it significant for the present research to investigate the representation of the Arab Spring in the American imprint media from a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective. Furthermore, the analytical study is unique in that the news reports under analysis have not been considered in any previous work in the context of Critical Discourse Analysis. The paper's hypothesis suggests that the media's representation of Arabs and Muslims is packed with discourses related to the ideology of Orientalism. In fact, the way by which Westerners have come to know Arabs in general is through the so-called Orientalism; the traditionally Western construction of non-Western cultures as isolated, irrational, and passive 'Other'. Edward W. Said, in his pioneering book, *Orientalism*, defined it as a mode of thinking based upon:

> an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and […] the occident. Thus a very large mass of writers […] have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, mind, destiny, and so on. (3)

According to him, Orientalism dates back to the period of the European Enlightenment and the colonization of the Arab World. It gave a rationalization for European colonialism based on a self-serving history in which "the West" constructed "the East" as significantly different and inferior, that is, in need of Western intervention. Islam, as well, is constructed under this dichotomy, which includes a binary opposition that makes the West dominant in modern, rational thought, and the Muslim the mysterious, dangerous Other. Accordingly, the present paper focuses on the following main points:

1- What are the topics and themes that are recurrent and emphasized in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* news articles about the Arab Spring?
2- What are the discursive strategies and linguistic forms employed in the representation of Arabs and Muslims?
3- Do the newspapers, through their representation of Arabs and Muslims, contribute to the formation of in-group and out-group identities?

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis methodology is used in this study to collect and analyze the set of selected media texts on the Arab Spring, and to achieve the objectives set out by this article, which suggests that the media's representation of Arabs and Muslims is saturated with the ideology of Orientalism. Through critical discourse analysis, we can explore how journalists, who are elite members within media organizations, employ discursive strategies that may serve their own agenda in their news coverage of the Arab Spring. According to Teun A. van Dijk, elites are members of dominant groups who have privileged access to discourse, and whose power is measured by the "extent of their discursive and communicative scope and resources" (255). Discursive strategies, on the other hand, are the linguistic means used by those elites to attain their targets goals in discourse. Besides, one of the main aims of Critical Discourse Analysis that matches the realm of this study is to deconstruct the hidden ideologies of discourses that help to produce unequal power[3] relations in societies. It focuses on language and its socio-cultural context and the ideological beliefs established through texts; it "offers

specific theories and methods for the analysis of narrative, argumentation, style, rhetoric, images, metaphor, interaction, ideologies, norms and values, and many other structures of text and talk and their cognitive basis and social functions" (Dijk and Teun 3). Therefore, it aims to raise the reader's awareness of the power of language in shaping their view and interpretation of events. Hence, as an analyst, the focus is on the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of dominance[4]. The selected method to analyze texts in this study is a multidisciplinary form of Critical Discourse Analysis, because one single method approach may not generate the appropriate results in doing Critical Discourse Analysis. According to van Dijk (1993), Critical Discourse Analysis necessitates a true multidisciplinarity and an account of intricate relationships between text, talk, social opinion, power, society and cultures. Hence, bearing this argument in mind and given that discourse analysis is essentially an interpretive and deconstructive reading, the approach to Critical Discourse Analysis in this study is a heterogeneous mode of analysis, encompassing a shared perspective that incorporates a range of approaches as practiced by van Dijk, Fairclough, and Wodak. The approaches utilized help examine elements of the text at a 'micro' level and consider the impact of such choices at a more 'macro' level. However, as emphasized by van Dijk (2023), Tian (2021), and Mullet (2018), the empirical analyses of discourses go beyond the popular but vague notion of "frame" and involve a more comprehensive and explicit analysis of the text and talk of social movements. Hence, CDA, in this study, presents the perception of the news gatekeepers' intention when producing news about the Arab Spring in general and Arabs in particular, as well as the perception of the news distributed to worldwide audiences.

The newspapers selected for this study are *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. All data is obtained from online sources due to the accessibility of online material. Both newspapers have an archive of their content available on their websites. The corpus of media text is based on purposive rather than arbitrary variety; it consists of articles reporting on the Arab Spring. News reports selected for analysis cover the period of the uprising from January 2011 to December 2011.

The New York Times and *The Washington Post* were selected for a number of reasons. Both are considered elite newspapers and are among the largest media outlets in the United States, ranking third and fifth, respectively, in terms of circulation size. They are leading newspapers with regard to the coverage of international news and views, drawing readers from every state and around the world.

Results and Analysis

The first step in the analysis process is to read the texts in question in an uncritical manner, assuming the role of a regular reader. In fact, the first reading shows that the majority of reports express support for the protestors. Yet, through extensive readings with a critical eye, and with the intention of detecting discursive strategies and patterns, a number of Orientalist themes appear in the majority of cases. The preliminary and common themes found in the coverage of the Arab Spring are violence in the Arab world (negative other representation), Islamophobia (Islam as a threat), and the Western superiority in comparison with Arabs (positive self-representation). The three themes are overlapping and interconnected. Accordingly, this section is divided into three parts, each devoted to discussing one of the three recurring themes.

Theme 1: Violence in the Arab world

In this section, the analysis focuses on how the Western media has presented the Arab uprisings to the world. The selection of news texts in this section shows a negative portrayal of events during this period; the central dominant theme in the newspapers' coverage is that of violence in the Arab world. This macro strategy is achieved through different micro strategies; accordingly, the focus is on how those strategies are applied to attain the underlying intentions hidden behind their discursive construction.

Headlines	Newspaper	Date of publication
Surge in Syrian Killings Is Reported Before Visit	*The New York Times*	December 21, 2011
If the Arab Spring Turns Ugly	*The New York Times*	August 27, 2011
Bahrain Protesters Clash With Police Near Capital After Teenager's Funeral	*The New York Times*	October 7, 2011
Violent Protests in Egypt Pit Thousands against Police	*The New York Times*	November 19, 2011
Bahrain Admits to 'Excessive Force' against Protesters	*The Washington Post*	November 21, 2011
Muammar el Quaddafi's End	*The New York Times*	October 20, 2011
In Rare Interview, Assad Denies Ordering Crackdown in Syria	*The New York Times*	December 7, 2011
Tripoli Coverage from Sky News Wins Praise, as other Reporters Remain in Rixos Hotel	*The Washington Post*	August 21, 2011

The distribution of news topics signals the dominance of negativity and the climate of conflict and tension. Violence, insecurity, and struggle are, essentially, the main topics of interest. As is obvious from the titles, the event is headlined primarily to convey that the Arab revolutions are all violent and aggressive. This is the common meaning and critical information upon which most of the articles converge, and to which the addressees perceive. In fact, from the first glance at the headlines of both newspapers, one can observe the number of words synonymous with 'aggression', 'fighting', 'antagonism', 'forcefulness', and 'carnage'. Headlines are generally constructed on the basis of a minimum of words and a maximum of knowledge; however, we notice that mystification is a common feature among the majority of headlines. Indispensable data are missing, which consequently leads to deceiving the receiver. In fact, headlines establish a cognitive macro-structure that helps to manipulate the way readers process

and comprehend the report. Consequently, any theme, participants, and events that are referred to in the headlines are stored in the memory of any reader, and with frequent recurrence of the same topic and connotations, the topic becomes part of the knowledge system of the reader. Here, authors present a readymade system of ideas about Arabs (the Other, the Orient) that maintains the existing stereotypes. Accordingly, newspapers manipulate the structure of the headline to serve ideological purposes when presenting events during the Arab Spring. Such manipulation includes highlighting certain aspects of the story while downplaying others.

Moving to the analysis of the reports, we notice as well the higher percentage of collocation lines in the negative description category in both newspapers. In fact, the narrative dimensions of the texts are extreme and appear to be explicitly structured to create a negative image of the Arab revolutions. At the lexical level, the majority of words used to represent Arabs indicate a non-neutral representation. It may be argued that the choice of word goes with the nature of the event described; however, violence is presented, not only noticeably, but also in an exaggerated way. This representation is constructed with overlexical preferences. According to Peter Teo, overlexicalization creates "over-completeness" in the news discourse, suggesting that no further analysis and interpretation is needed. Moreover, Roger Fowler describes it as an "excess of quasisynonymous terms for entities or ideas that are a particular preoccupation or problem in the culture's discourse" (85). For instance, the words "violence" and its alternates are prevalent and repeated markedly in all the texts.

More importantly, reported speech is used in reports in all its forms, mainly direct speech, indirect speech, and the slipping of speech reporting. To strengthen the rhetorical dimension of their news texts, Journalists prefer statements from sources that are consistent with what they genuinely believe. The majority of sources are anti-government ones, which announce violence and emphasize it. This confirms that journalists are not interested in avoiding coverage of other people, such as those who supported their leader during the uprisings. Hence, there is a significant imbalance between sources. Besides, the quoted voices are attributed with some authoritative quality to legitimize the journalist's claims in the news story. Likewise, the reporting verbs used to introduce the reported discourse also reveal the journalist's position and ideology. Accordingly, reporting voices that selectively align with the newspaper's plan to make strong and valid arguments jeopardize the credibility of U.S. journalistic practices. In view of that, the analysis of the quoting structures, in their components of agent identity and reporting verbs, gives us a representation of what the press considers relevant for that part of information, which is constructed on the basis of words, not truths.

At the level of transitivity, we note that journalists employ various types of processes to convey their attitudes, depending on their intentions. Here, we are concerned with the whole clause, rather than just the verb and its object. Hence, every choice of any process type reveals the hidden ideology behind the surface structure of words. For instance, both active and passive forms are used in reports. The active form is used to show violence, the agent, and the victim of the action, while the passive form is used to highlight the consequences of all types of violence.

Unfortunately, all the changes that happen in the Arab world have been identified through the lens of an Orientalist view, which presents Arabs through discriminatory, categorical, and stereotypical labeling. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* portray Arabs as 'violent killers' who kill each other irrationally. This uncovers what van Dijk refers to as dichotomic, culturally specific conditions formed by social identities, which may be consciously or unconsciously guided by political ideology. Hence, ideology manipulates news narrative discourse, whereas news narrative discourse helps to reinforce the existing ideology. In fact, the process of labeling is closely connected to the concept of representation, as things are given specific names to identify them, depending on an ideological basis. Thus, when the journalist identifies social objects, he/she represents them from his/her own angle; for instance, describing

a social actor as violent helps in the representation and perception of that social actor as such. Moreover, the reappearance of such representation leads automatically to the creation of mental conceptions about that actor, which gradually becomes an unchallengeable characteristic that turns out to be part of a shared culture. Therefore, such categorization misguides the social perception of the 'Other' and thus his identity as well. Accordingly, identity is never fixed, more than ever in times of conflict; rather, it is constructed through communicative action.

Therefore, we can confidently conclude that both newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, prioritize violence over objectivity. Both play a prominent role in the reproduction of stereotyped images about the Arab land through the discourse to which they have access. The results provide evidence supporting the research hypothesis that the media's representation of Arabs is packed with the ideology of Orientalism via the implementation of various discursive strategies. Those discursive strategies are forms of discursive manipulation of reality because the journalist consciously intrudes in such a reality to achieve their intended effects.

Theme 2: Islamophobia

In this section, the focus shifts to how Islam and Muslims are portrayed during the Arab Spring. Islam as a threat was prevalent in the American media coverage of the 2011 uprising events. Thus, this section aims to examine the linguistic strategies employed by the authors of the selected newspapers to maintain the persisting conceptualization of Islam and Muslims as 'other' or, instead, as a 'threat.'

Headlines	Newspaper	Date
Egypt's Uprising Stirs Fears of Persecution of Minority Coptic Christians	*The Washington Post*	February 03, 2011
Exiled Islamists Watch Rebellion Unfold at Home	*The New York Times*	July 18, 2011
The Vacuum after Qaddafi	*The New York Times*	February 27, 2011
Why Israel Fears a Free Egypt	*The Washington Post*	February 04, 2011
U.S. Must Take Sides to Keep the Arab Spring from Islamist Takeover	*The Washington Post*	Mars 23, 2011
The Islam Debate Egypt Needs	*The Washington Post*	August 04, 2011

By using negative lexical items, Muslims as social actors are represented in such a stereotypical way that they are associated with fundamentalism, violence, terrorism, extremism, radicalism, salafism… Actually, when the newspapers frequently use such terms and associate Islam with terrorism, both notions become synonymous in the readers' minds; thus, swaying their perception of Muslims and Islam. As remarked, the referential strategy in the presented data plays a pivotal role in terms of in- and out-grouping, which automatically leads to the inclusion of one group and the exclusion of the other. This is a clear illustration of the ideological square concept presented by van Dijk. For instance, the lexical choices the journalists use discursively construct Muslims as the out-group, and the U.S. as the in-group. In the discourse of both

newspapers, the concept of the West versus Islam defines the separation between us and them. Muslims are not only portrayed negatively, but they are also over-lexicalized with a broad negative characterization. The repetition of some words within the exact text is remarkable in different reports. Fowler considers this strategy to be a pragmatic approach to encoding ideology in news discourse.

Sourcing is another tool used by journalists to emphasize good things about us and bad ones about the Muslim 'other'. The majority of sources are American, which shows America's concern about the problems raised by Islamists. The question of who to refer to for a certain narrative plays a vital role in how an event is constructed. In fact, the voices of Western sources of information are all present to give the discourse factuality and authenticity. Hence, those voices absolutely influence the reader's understanding of events. However, the recurrence of those voices leads us to consider a significant point that is the absence of the voices of the so-called 'Islamists'. In the majority of texts analyzed, there is an absence of Islamits' voices. Certainly, the presence of those voices will significantly alter the results of the selected texts. The omission of those voices can be subcategorized under Thomas Huckin's manipulative silences. According to him, they are "those that intentionally conceal relevant information from the reader or listener, to the advantage of the writer or speaker; unlike other types of silence, these silences depend for their success on not being noticed by the reader or listener" (351). Thus, this silence in the majority of texts purposefully misleads the reader in a way that is satisfactory to the journalist. As stated by Huckin, Manipulative silences are deceptive or misleading in that they conceal certain information relevant to the topic at hand, thereby giving added prominence to other information. In this way, "quotation patterns form an ideological mechanism used to maintain social control of the 'powerful' over those who are marginalized out of power" (Teo 41). Thus, Muslims are not even given a chance to defend themselves and respond to the accusations directed at them. Otherwise, "virtually anything unsaid would count as a 'textual silence' in virtually any text" (Huckin 353). More importantly, the way Western sources are referred to is equally ideological. These referring terms draw attention to the position and status of the referent that the journalist wants the reader to focus on. Consequently, the quotation patterns in the data analyzed are powerful ideological devices that could manipulate the reader's perception and interpretation of Islam and Muslims.

If we turn our attention to the syntactic structures, we will find that Islamists are mostly put in subject position in transitive active clauses in comparison with other participants who are constantly portrayed as passive actors. This practice, which is a linguistic ideological process, depicts Muslims as negative actors, while others are depicted as victims. Hence, together with the fact that Muslims are frequently represented as committing terrorist acts, the image of Islam as a threat is reinforced.

Moreover, the newspapers use general conclusions about Muslims or Muslim communities, which present their limited and traditionalist approach towards Islam. Actually, generalization is the extension of some characteristic and actions of one particular group of people to a more general set. In the texts analyzed, we remark a generalization of the crimes of Al Quaida and other groups to a constantly larger group of people i.e. Muslims in general. References to Muslims emerge frequently in relation to terrorist operations of some groups, to the extent that it becomes a prevailing part of Muslim history. This mechanism gives reporters:

> A convenient means to ascribe certain key qualities to the main participants of the news discourse without encumbering the reader with tedious details; on another, the selection and representation of a particular generalizing attribute also hints at an underlying ideology that might have motivated the choice in the first place. (Teo 16)

This strategy can also be considered part of the exclusion theory. The problem of generalization is that when we classify someone into a specific social group, our perception of that person is also affected. For example, if a Muslim person is defending himself or herself in any case, he/she will surely be perceived as aggressive and violent; however, if he/she is a non-Muslim, he/she will be perceived as courageous. Hence, this shows that generalizations go hand in hand with stereotypes, which are the basis of prejudice and discrimination.

In fact, the issue of discrimination in the media is discussed in Fowler. Following his line of reasoning, discriminatory practices do not work in relation to the individual, but in relation to a certain group where individuals are involved and placed; consequently, constructing a stereotype which cultures ascribe to the group. Hence, these sets of common-sense beliefs are attached prejudicially to individuals; that is why "there is an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterized limitlessly by means of a handful of recklessly general and repeatedly deployed clichés" (Said 230). The stereotype of Islam as a fundamentalist phenomenon was shaped long ago by different agents. Once a stereotype is constituted, there is no chance for deconstructing it or even reconstructing it in light of any new event, such as the Arab Spring.

So far, we have seen how discursive strategies like generalization, over-lexicalization, intertextuality, labeling, and transitivity can be used to create the image of the terrorist Muslim, which perpetuates the negative stereotyping of Muslims in general. The coverage of Islam is then classified as negative because it links Islam and Muslims to conflict, violence, intolerance, and extremism.

Theme 3: Western Superiority

The news texts discussed in the preceding sections all share a negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims during the Arab revolutions. In contrast, the texts chosen for analysis in this chapter present a positive image of America. The common theme in the texts examined below is American superiority over other Arab nations. In this section, we explore how the same linguistic devices are utilized to create different representations of various actors within the same context. The focus, then, is on both the explicit and implicit discursive strategies used by authors to depict America with positive attributes.

Headlines	Newspaper	date
U.S. Launches Campaign to Track Down Libyan Missiles	*The Washington Post*	October 13, 2011
Western Finance Bodies Face Challenges in Funding Arab Spring Countries	*The New York Times*	September 21, 2011
In Tripoli, Support for Gaddafi is Shallow	*The Washington Post*	May 31, 2011
Clinton Credited with Key Role in Success of NATO Airstrikes, Libyan Rebels	*The Washington Post*	October 28, 2011
Clinton Meets with Syrian Opposition	*The Washington Post*	December 06, 2011
White House Presses Egypt's Leaders to Speed up Reforms	*The Washington Post*	November 23, 2011

In the analyzed texts above, we find that both newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, employ different linguistic features such as lexical choices, transitivity, modality, metaphor, hyperbole, euphemism, intertextuality, and presupposition to project a positive image of Westerners, while projecting a negative image of Arabs. Both headlines and lead paragraphs are used strategically to serve this ideological purpose and to convey the view of the newspaper, highlighting certain aspects of one group while downplaying others. The findings further uncover a considerably strong ideological tendency in the analyzed texts to project, explicitly and implicitly, a negative image of Arab governments in an attempt to legitimize the imposition of sanctions against some countries.

In fact, van Dijk's notion of ideological square provides a more reasonable description for the findings suggested in this study. van Dijk contributes a theoretical concept, namely the 'ideological square', which summarizes the double strategy of positive in-group representation and negative out-group representation, where 'we' are good and 'they' are bad. Accordingly, in his book, *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*, John Richardson noted that the ideological square foresees that "'outsiders' of various types will be represented in a negative way and 'insiders' will be represented in a positive way" (51). Correspondingly, the ideological square functions to polarize the in-group and the out-group in order to present the "We" group favorably and the "They" group unfavorably. It is a way of perceiving and representing the world according to "Their" ideology.

The linguistic devices employed in the texts analyzed in this section have a remarkable discourse potential to misrepresent news stories. For instance, through analyzing the transitivity system, it became clear that some structures could be used to consider the power relations. Through the skillful application of the active structure, the positive role of Western officials and institutions as active, powerful units is foregrounded in the headlines, leads, and throughout all the texts, as they are consistently placed in the first position in active clauses. Quite the opposite,

Arabs are often portrayed as passive, failing to develop and progress, and relying on external support and assistance. This gives Western officials and institutions greater thematic roles in the text as a whole, contrary to Arabs.

The twin strategy of binary opposition is also evident through lexical choices. As stated previously, lexical choices have always been recognized as critical in the production of meaning and the routine of representation. The author divides the world into good and evil through his choice of categorization process. When we consider the words used to represent both sides, we notice that all positive terms are employed to represent Western officials and their actions; conversely, all the negative words are used to depict Arabs and their behaviors. Thus, through the use of specific keywords, different identities are assigned to the governments and those involved in the uprising. While civilians in Arab countries are brutally attacked by their dictatorial regimes, Western governments are working tirelessly to protect those civilians and maintain peace and stability in the world.

Such ideological representation and biased language in news media result in the legitimization of one side and the suppression of the other. Accordingly, the struggle to face terrorists and to liberate people became the primary ideological justification for NATO intervention in Libya. Both newspapers are trying to persuade the reader that such an intervention is advantageous not only to the Libyans but also to other nations, because they are destroying a dangerous terrorist force. Hence, the way in which the response to the Libyan revolution is represented makes NATO intervention appear moral, legitimate, and rational, accentuating the humanitarian nature of the intervention. Hence, following this line, the NATO bombings were undertaken with humanitarian intent, and it is not considered a violent act. As Edward Said has noted in a new preface to his 1978 publication *Orientalism* "every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires" (xvi). This is precisely what the United States does in order to convince the international community.

Actually, the narrative structure of news reports is crucial for a proper understanding of events; hence, it is often manipulated ideologically by the newspaper. In the texts analyzed, we conclude that there is a tendency in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to de-narrativize events related to NATO violence and its effects on people; yet, on the other hand, they present stories of Arab violence in a straightforward narrative, with detailed information and statistics. Consequently, the receiver generalizes the specifications of a particular member of one group to that entire group. In other words, the bad description of some minority group is generalized to the majority group, i.e., the Arabs.

Furthermore, the use of metaphor in various texts reveals both positive self-representation and negative other representation. The use of such figurative language by the author and Western officials is not primarily intended to present facts but rather to convey their theories and goals and to persuade the audience. The U.S. administration in all examples is personalized to activate the reader's emotions. In this context, metaphors can also be manipulative and impact the receiver, either positively or negatively. They are further used to justify war as a "just war," as stated by Lakoff (2003), Kendall (2020), and Dunn (2021).

Norman Fairclough's concept of intertextuality is also of valuable help in analyzing the Western newspapers' ideology and the ways they choose to achieve their political objectives. In the analyzed texts, we clearly notice that "in-group" members have more access to media compared to "out-group" members. Hence, the presence of Westerners' voices in the news articles through intertextuality helps to authorize and justify their arguments and reactions. However, the systematic exclusion of Arab officials' voices helps to silence them absolutely and disempowers their arguments and justifications. Among all the analyzed articles, either

there are no quotations from the Arab side or they are very limited in number, and the majority of those quotations are presented indirectly, in contrast to Western ones. In this case, not all groups have access to discourse; hence, they do not have the same speaking rights. Such intertextual framing augments the possibility of convincing the reader with the preferred stereotyped discourse. So, since only the power elites have access to such genres of discourse, the reader tends to believe their claims for that reason. Moreover, since elites serve as reliable sources, they reproduce the dominant ideologies. Accordingly, intertextual analysis is a crucial tool for extracting ideological traces in news narratives. Thus, newspapers undoubtedly present images that are not purely objective, as evidenced by their choice of narratives and the sources used.

Hence, the critical discourse analysis applied to the present texts explains how the discursive mechanisms used by newspapers reproduce racism by creating positive images of "Us" and negative ones of "Them." Western media manages to reproduce a discourse of condemnation, strengthening the stereotype of developing countries, which is opposed to a positive civilized image of Western countries, through empowering and approving their own superiority, and emphasizing the difference between "Us" and "Them." Hence, the self/other dichotomy influences the author's mode of writing, which contributes indirectly to the representation and reproduction of racism. van Dijk asserts that news racism provides systematic negative images of the other, contributing to negative mental models, stereotypes, prejudices, and ideologies about those "Other." Edward Said, correspondingly, maintains that it is through such discourse and its effects that the West has been able to legitimize itself over the uncivilized "Other." The repeated discourses approve that the Orient is primitive, mysterious, and unable to govern itself. Said, as well, suggests that all discourse, remarkably, discourse about other cultures, is inherently ideological. This discourse creates a considerable divide between East and West, situating the West as a superior culture to the East.

Conclusion

We can conclude that mass media cannot offer a standpoint which is free from a biased interpretation of events; equally, the media institutions "tend to construct reality in a manner congruent with their underlying ideological and political functions" (Sai-hua and Nakamura 411). By employing a persuasive narrative style, we have realized that authors manipulate the reader to interpret events in particular ways. We have shown how some dominant journalists limit the communicative rights of some agents by controlling their access to discourse. By doing so, they are implicitly manipulating the reader's understanding of events, as well as their attitudes and ideas. In fact, such use of language helps the authors not only to describe a specific event in terms of their own way of conceptualizing it, but also to persuade the audience to create reality in their own ways. Additionally, we have recognized that each news article is filled with a certain ideology and agenda. CDA is, then, used in this study as a successful method for analyzing texts in order to uncover those hidden ideologies. It is an adequate methodological approach for understanding how political powers create divisions in society, and revealing which group is constructed as superior and which one as inferior. In this respect, CDA allows for the disclosure of patterns of language use denoting discriminatory and exclusionary practices. More importantly, using CDA helps to reveal what type of knowledge is produced and reproduced through language use. Hence, the methodology used helps to answer the research questions stated earlier.

The analysis of the news discourse of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* shows that the major dominant themes about the Arab Spring highlight the notions of violence in the

Arab world and Islam as a threat. On the other hand, it highlights the positive representation of the West. The positive representation of the West serves to create an opposed set of power relations which constructs the West as the in-group, and Arabs, along with Muslims, as the out-groups. American political morality has been a dominant theme in the American media from the start of the Arab revolutions. This morality has been revealed through a particular discourse of Western values that has finally been imported to Arab societies. This is clear evidence of the operation of the ideological square, which consists of highlighting our good actions and their bad ones. More specifically, the American media representation of Arabs and Islam predominantly maintains that Arabs are different, inferior, evil, violent, backward, and uncivilized, and Islam is considered a threat to the international community; on the other hand, Americans are the civilized, superior, and good ones. This is precisely what the post-colonial discourse in social theory identifies as American Eurocentrism. It is a cultural phenomenon that considers cultures of non-American societies from a Western standpoint. America, for instance, behaves as a universal signifier in that it assumes the superiority of American cultural values over those of non-Western societies. Accordingly, American media coverage of Arab countries reinforces the 'we' notion that already exists; so, its coverage is instead an assertion of power. Therefore, the West in general and America in particular remain hegemonic in their coverage of Arab uprisings.

Additionally, America's coverage of the Arab Spring is shaped by its foreign policy in the Muslim and Arab world. In other words, the American media has covered the Arab Spring from the standpoint of the United States perceived foreign policy interests and main concerns in the region. In fact, it has devoted coverage to particular uprisings at very different rates. For example, the revolts in Syria and Libya were highlighted more than those of other countries, like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, or Morocco, in which the number of articles was very low. The quantity of articles covering Libya and Syria was remarkable, as well as the length of text describing the events. Those dissimilarities have been controlled by whether the governments were the United States' friend or enemy; both Libya and Syria are considered enemies of the United States, while others are considered strong allies. More importantly, the protests in Bahrain were analogous in seriousness to those of Syria and Libya; however, the United States did not prefer to intervene in Bahrain as it did in others. As seen in the analysis, all texts were supporting the NATO intervention in Libya, and calling for the same action in Syria. The policy of war on terrorism was also present in the coverage of the Arab spring, especially while representing Islam. The American media is adopting the White House agenda in reporting on foreign affairs, particularly on war against Islam. In any case, the American media did not forget to include Israel in its coverage; even though it was outside the circle of conflict; yet, it showed much concern with its well-being. For instance, many articles focused on the effects of the Arab uprisings on the security of Israel.

In light of this, the American media coverage of the Arab spring is automatically biased and unjust. Therefore, news is neither a free nor an objective reflection of reality; instead, a newspaper goes through different processes that are guided by certain rules and conventions that shape the final product, mainly the text. Therefore, the reality in this case is made and not reflected; in other words, it is constructed linguistically. Accordingly, the picture emerging from the analysis presented in the preceding sections is only a contemporary manifestation of an old representation that has been ongoing in American newspapers for the past decades that matches with the article hypothesis which suggests that the Arab spring is represented in the Western media through an Orientalist prism.

Hence, it can be concluded that the effect of some events such as the 9/ 11 attacks and others preceding ones seems to limit and structure the news discourse about Arabs and Muslims. There has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Unfortunately, little attention was devoted to covering successful experiences in the Arab region, or quoting the

versions of other international sources. For instance, little attention was paid to the case of Qatar, which announced plans to hold elections in 2013 despite there being no protesters on the streets, no aggression, and no deaths, and to the Moroccan case in which the king decided to change the whole constitution. Thus far, those shining experiences have been partially neglected by the Western media. The Arab Spring as a revolution failed in changing perceptions about Arabs and Muslims; hence, what is really more needed instantly is a media revolution. We should start from scratch and go back to the traditional ethics of journalism, because presently, ethics are diminished in the media. Journalists should work to promote intercultural dialogue, not to raise racism and discrimination. Freedom of expression does not mean freedom of the media; so, journalists should be responsible and aware of the consequences of what they publish. Alternatively, we should explore ways in which journalists and the media can develop new ethical practices in a context of upsetting trends and realities that affect the notions of dialogue and diversity.

Notes:

1. A discursive strategy is a systemic representation in discourse that relates to a particular ideology and achieves a specific effect.
2. From a critical linguistic standpoint, ideology is a system of ideas, beliefs, and values that are shared collectively by social groups.
3. Power is a crucial notion in the field of CDA. Fowler (1985) defines power as the ability of people and institutions to manipulate the behavior and material lives of others.
4. van Dijk (1993) considers 'dominance' in the area of CDA as the exercise of social power by elites, institutions, or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial, and gender inequality.

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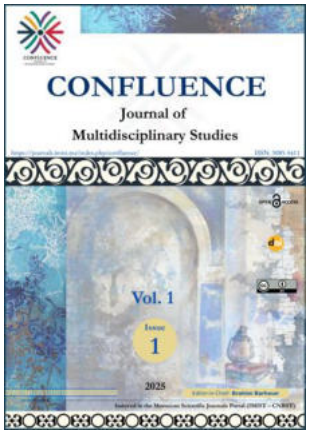
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Shifting Currents: *Hespress* and *El País* Framing of Irregular Migration Before and After Spain's Recognition of the Moroccan Sahara

Omar Kouiyache[a] and Oussama Badad[b]
[a]Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Tetouan, Morocco; [b]University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada.

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Omar Kouiyache is a PhD candidate in Cultural and Performance Studies 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. 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

Oussama Badad is a PhD student in the Communication program at the University of Ottawa. He holds a master's degree in Media Studies from the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. His research focuses on global media, audience studies, and political communication, with a particular emphasis on the MENA region. Oussama is dedicated to studying the role of media narratives in shaping political perceptions and public discourse, as well as exploring the relationship between media and international relations.

obada022@uottawa.ca https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7143-5423

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Omar Kouiyache[a] and Oussama Badad[b]
[a]Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Tetouan, Morocco; [b]University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how *Hespress* and *El País* have framed irregular migration before and after Spain's policy shift regarding the Sahara. The objective is to examine how a foreign policy change can influence migration narratives in national media. Methodologically, the research employs qualitative content analysis of articles from two pivotal moments: the 2021 Ceuta border crisis and the 2023 post-recognition period. During the Ceuta crisis, *Hespress* used the "Humanitarian Crisis and Abandonment" and "Colonial Mindset and Political Extortion" frames, emphasizing migrant suffering and perceived Spanish betrayal. After Spain endorsed Morocco's autonomy plan, coverage transitioned to "Partnership and Cooperation" and "Development-Driven Migration," highlighting diplomatic alignment. *El País* initially employed the frames "Instrumentalized Humanitarianism" and "EU Security and Spain's Sovereignty," portraying migrants as both victims and instruments in Morocco's strategy. Later, it adopted the "Strategic Partnership and Stability" and "Managed Migration" frames, presenting migration as structured and cooperative. The findings demonstrate how diplomatic developments can reshape media narratives. This study highlights the media's role in aligning migration framing with political agendas and shaping public perceptions of cross-border movement.

KEYWORDS

Migration
Media Framing
Morocco
Spain
Geopolitics

Introduction

For decades, the Mediterranean and Atlantic regions have served as crucial corridors for irregular migration. Because of its position, Morocco has been an important country of both origin and transit. The proximity of Moroccan shores to Europe has made the routes particularly significant. One of the busiest routes for irregular migration is the Strait of Gibraltar, which spans approximately 14 kilometers long (Lahlou 3). Moreover, the hazardous Atlantic route to the Canary Islands is also among the most frequently used migration paths (Holleis). Thousands of Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans undertake the dangerous journey to Europe every year (Fargues 60).

However, migration dynamics in this region are not merely shaped by individual choices or structural push-pull factors; they are also deeply politicized (Pettrachin). Media narratives play a pivotal role in framing these movements, influencing public perception and policy responses. The 2021 Ceuta crisis, during which 8,000 migrants entered the Spanish enclave within 48 hours (Kasraoui), and Spain's 2022 recognition of Morocco's autonomy plan for the Sahara marked significant turning points in bilateral relations (Minder).

Contact ✉ omar.kouiyache@etu.uae.ac.ma ✉ obada022@uottawa.ca
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This study investigates how Morocco's *Hespress* and Spain's *El País* framed irregular migration before and after Spain's 2022 Sahara policy shift. Using framing theory and qualitative textual analysis, we examine coverage of two key events: the May 2021 Ceuta border crisis (pre-shift) and the February 2023 migration wave (post-shift), revealing how these outlets constructed distinct narratives about migration flows during pivotal moments in bilateral diplomacy.

Literature Review

Migration Trends in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Regions

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the use of Mediterranean and Atlantic routes. The Canary Islands, situated around 200 kilometers from Tarfaya, have experienced an extraordinary surge in migrants during this period (*Al Jazeera*). Thousands of individuals have arrived at the archipelago, representing a sevenfold increase compared to 2019 (Godenau and Buraschi 4). This increase is attributed to the reinforcement of migration regulations along the Central Mediterranean route, compelling migrants to pursue alternative avenues. The Western Mediterranean, although closer, remains dangerous because of unpredictable weather, busy sea routes, and strict checks by European authorities (González 3).

Moroccans constitute a significant portion of those crossing these routes, reflecting deep-rooted socio-economic challenges within the country. Unemployment, especially among the youth, remains a driving force. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues, prompting more individuals to risk the journey (Sebastián 50). Additionally, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, often using Morocco as a transit point, have increasingly utilized these crossings. Reports by UNHCR highlight the growing number of mixed migration flows, where individuals from diverse backgrounds converge on Moroccan shores, seeking passage to Europe (Canton 351). In 2023, over 56,000 irregular immigrants entered Morocco en route to Europe through unauthorized means (Statista Research Department).

The Moroccan government has implemented measures to curb irregular migration, including increasing patrols and working with European partners such as Spain. Nevertheless,these efforts have met with limited success (Nunez 10). Human rights organizations have criticized the approach, alleging cases of forced deportations and limited support for migrants stranded in Morocco. Meanwhile, the securitization of European borders has inadvertently increased the dangers of crossing. Smugglers frequently exploit migrant desperation, taking advantage of their vulnerability (Frontex).

Moroccan-Spanish Relations

The dynamics of Moroccan-Spanish relations are closely linked to migration issues. They are also influenced by broader geopolitical and diplomatic factors (Ruiz Diaz 5). The period from 2021 to 2024 witnessed significant developments. These included diplomatic disagreements, migration crises, and Spain's historic recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara (Minder). Morocco and Spain have historically had a complex relationship. This relationship has been marked by cooperation in trade and security, but punctuated by recurring disputes involving migration, territorial waters, and the status of the Sahara (Rihne 3).

One of the most critical moments in recent Moroccan-Spanish relations occurred in 2021, during the Ceuta border crisis. Over 8,000 migrants, including minors, crossed into the Spanish territory within days. This event was widely seen as a response to Spain's decision to host

Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Polisario Front, for medical treatment (Kasraoui). Rabat viewed the move as a challenge to Morocco's territorial claims over the Sahara. The crisis highlighted the use of migration as a diplomatic tool. Morocco signaled its discontent by loosening border controls (Miholjcic 6). This incident underscored the delicate balance in Moroccan-Spanish diplomacy. Migration often intersects with broader political disputes.

In 2022, Spain recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara, shifting from its neutral stance, a move Rabat hailed as a diplomatic victory, citing its lobbying efforts and strategic role in controlling migration (Minder). However, Spanish critics argued it undermined Sahrawi self-determination. Despite this progress, tensions remain over fishing rights, territorial disputes (Rihne 2), and Morocco's use of migration as leverage in EU negotiations, highlighting its strategy of trading geopolitical influence for political and economic gains (Lahlou 5).

Media Framing of Migration

The way the media frames irregular migration has a significant impact on public opinion. It affects opinions and choices about policy. Media framing has an impact on how people perceive a certain topic based on the coverage they choose to adopt (Entman 51). Liberal media tend to place more emphasis on the humanitarian aspects of migration, whereas conservative media highlight crime and security (Cisneros 3). Media coverage in Europe varies by nation and is influenced by local political environments and historical migration trends (Carvalho et al. 117).

In Spain, Rodríguez-Pérez et al. remark that the media predominantly employ a political frame rather than a social or human-interest perspective (167). Migrants are underrepresented as news sources, while political actors and international institutions shape the discourse. However, when human-interest frames are used, migrants become more visible, emphasizing their personal narratives.

Studies reveal polarized migration framing in Spanish and Moroccan media. Spanish outlets alternate between humanizing migrants as "travelers" or demonizing them as "threats," often mirroring political agendas like VOX's campaigns (Montagut et al. 28). EU-wide research shows similar contradictions, vacillating between humanitarian and security frames (Moore et al. 89). Moroccan media similarly oscillates between vulnerability and criminality narratives, reflecting the country's dual role as transit hub and destination (El Yousfi and El Allame 50).

According to Brader, the way immigration is portrayed in the media shapes emotional responses such as fear and sympathy, which subsequently influence political attitudes and policy preferences (967). For instance, emphasizing the suffering of migrants can increase sympathy and support for humanitarian measures, whilst drawing attention to security risks can encourage requests for more stringent border controls.

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory

Framing theory in media studies examines how information is selectively presented to highlight some aspects of events while downplaying others (Entman 7). This process influences public perception, constructing narratives aligned with particular viewpoints or solutions (Hallahan 2). Through techniques such as repetition, metaphor, and selective language, framing shapes audience interpretations of complex issues (Entman 7). It is rarely neutral, being shaped by economic, cultural, and political factors that influence media priorities (Klein and Amis 1325).

In conflict settings, the media often simplify complexity into binary oppositions, reinforcing identities and attracting audience attention (Weaver 144). Framing also plays a key role in

coverage of societal issues such as migration, where emotionally charged language, selective imagery, and strategic sourcing influence public opinion (Gjerazi 60). By amplifying certain aspects and minimizing others, media outlets profoundly fashion societal attitudes and policy debates (Boswell et al. 2).

Scholars highlight the significant impact media framing has had on the perception of migration issues, with coverage often varying significantly depending on the political and social contexts in which it is situated (Klein and Amis 1325). Research suggests that media narratives frequently adapt to align with shifting political realities. For example, in their study of Saudi-Iranian relations, Badad and El-Nawawy observe a dramatic reframing of narratives following the normalization of diplomatic ties between the two countries (16). This finding underscores the broader tendency for media narratives to evolve in response to changing political landscapes, illustrating how framing strategies are often determined by external political developments.

Methodology

Qualitative Textual Analysis

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine how *El País* and *Hespress* framed Moroccan irregular migration during two key moments: the 2021 Ceuta border crisis (17–26 May) and the 2023 migration wave (1–10 February). This method involves close, contextual reading of media texts to identify recurring patterns in language, imagery, and narrative structure—elements that reveal the framing strategies used by each outlet (Tesch, 4).

Rather than seeking a single "correct" interpretation, textual analysis explores a range of plausible meanings**,** uncovering the cultural, ideological, and political assumptions embedded in the media discourse (Altheide 288). It situates these interpretations within their historical and socio-political contexts, explaining how certain frames become naturalized as "common sense" among audiences (Kuckartz 62). This interpretive flexibility enables a nuanced understanding of how media narratives resonate with public sentiment and influence broader policy discourse (Altheide 291).

To conduct this analysis, the study uses archival research to gather news articles from the two selected periods. For each outlet, 20 articles were sampled from the pre-recognition phase and 20 from the post-recognition phase, resulting in a corpus of 80 articles. The selection was based on relevance to the migration events, focusing on news reports, editorials, and opinion pieces.

An inductive, interpretive approach was employed to identify dominant frames. One researcher conducted close readings of each article, paying attention to patterns in diction, thematic emphasis, and narrative progression. Frames were not drawn from a predefined coding scheme but instead emerged from the data, evaluated based on their frequency, contextual salience, and ability to reflect shifts in media discourse.

Results

Hespress

Migration Crisis

In its coverage of the 2021 Ceuta migration surge, *Hespress* employs two main frames: "Humanitarian Crisis and Abandonment," which highlights migrant suffering and Morocco's

sense of betrayal by Spain, and "Colonial Mindset and Political Extortion," which presents Spain's actions as colonial and Morocco's response as justified political pressure.

Humanitarian Crisis and Abandonment

This frame portrays Moroccan migrants as vulnerable individuals neglected by both Moroccan and Spanish authorities, emphasizing the socio-economic struggles that drive them to migrate. Articles emphasize how migrants, including minors and families, face dangerous conditions while attempting to reach Ceuta. In "Lack of Spanish Security Encourages Thousands to Swim to Ceuta," it reports that "the weak Spanish security coverage significantly contributed to the massive influx," describing migrants struggling against the sea. Another article, "Five Thousand Migrants Arrive in Ceuta by Swimming," notes that although no fatalities were recorded, migrants were rescued by the Red Cross and police, emphasizing the lack of timely humanitarian intervention.

Hespress employs terms like "abandoned," "neglected," and "vulnerable" to characterize the migrants' condition. References to "families and children" reinforce the humanitarian dimension, while the contrast between rescue efforts and the "absence of proactive measures" highlights governmental neglect. Testimonies from young migrants expressing "hopelessness," "desperation," and "lack of future prospects" position migration as an act of survival rather than defiance. *Hespress* builds a narrative of youth risking their lives due to structural poverty and rigid Spanish security measures. An emotional story, "A Moroccan Father Attempts to Cross to Ceuta to Secure His Disabled Son's Future" (Chamekh), quotes the father saying, "I just want to save my son. I want him to get an education and a better life. Morocco rejected my son, and I am willing to die so that he can live," personalizing the humanitarian crisis.

Colonial Mindset and Political Extortion

Hespress further develops the narrative of Spain as a lingering colonial force by portraying its policies toward Morocco as rooted in historical betrayal and thinly veiled hostility. In its coverage of the Ceuta migration crisis, *Hespress* stresses that Spanish officials, rather than addressing shared responsibility, escalate tensions through "militarized rhetoric" and veiled threats, casting Morocco as the destabilizer. This is reinforced by accusations of a "three-card trick" allegedly employed by Prime Minister Sánchez to maintain Spanish political leverage while masking contradictions in foreign policy. The articles denounce Spain for presenting itself as Morocco's partner while supporting actors hostile to Moroccan territorial integrity, framing Madrid as a duplicitous power operating under colonial logic.

Additionally, *Hespress* alleges that Spain manipulates its influence in the EU to restrict Moroccan exports and block key agreements, effectively acting as an "economic gatekeeper for Europe." This implies a deliberate effort to maintain economic dominance in a post-colonial context. The outlet depicts Spain's hostility as systemic, embedded in a political and media climate that demonizes Moroccan agency while deflecting attention from Spanish complicity. Overall, *Hespress* frames Spain's actions as a mix of economic blackmail and diplomatic sabotage, using terms like "economic obstruction" and "strategic exploitation" to argue that Spain intentionally curtails Moroccan autonomy and development.

Post-Recognition

In the second phase, following Spain's shift on the Sahara, *Hespress* introduces two new frames: "Partnership and Cooperation," portraying a renewed diplomatic alliance, and

"Development-Driven Migration," emphasizing joint economic projects as a solution to irregular migration. These frames reflect a more optimistic and strategic ton.

Partnership and Cooperation

The Strategic Partnership and Security Cooperation frame highlights the strengthened diplomatic and security collaboration between Morocco and Spain, portraying both as allies managing migration and ensuring regional stability. The coverage has shifted from confrontation to coordination and shared goals. One article, "Spain and Morocco Enhance Border Security Cooperation" (Knine), states that "Moroccan security forces, in coordination with their Spanish counterparts, have successfully dismantled multiple human smuggling networks," reflecting the "deepening strategic partnership" between Rabat and Madrid. This marks a shift from viewing border control as Morocco's sole burden.

Another piece, "Spain Allocates Four-Wheel Drive Vehicles to Support Morocco in Combating Irregular Migration" (Chamekh), notes that "through intelligence-sharing and coordinated patrols, both nations have significantly reduced illegal border crossings" and that "Spain has recognized Morocco's key role in stabilizing migration routes and pledged additional support." This suggests a partnership in which Spain acknowledges Morocco's efforts rather than issuing unilateral expectations.

Hespress uses terms like "strategic partnership," "bilateral cooperation," and "joint efforts" to portray the two countries as equals. Phrases like "successful dismantling of smuggling networks" and "coordinated patrols" frame their actions as effective and mutually beneficial. Citing Spanish officials praising Morocco's role reinforces the image of Morocco as a responsible partner. The phrase "Spain has recognized Morocco's key role" signals a narrative shift from pressure to recognition. Additionally, terms such as "intelligence-sharing," "stability," and "regional security" position border control within a broader geopolitical framework, reflecting a move toward framing migration governance as a shared and cooperative effort.

Development-Driven Migration

This frame highlights the economic benefits of migration agreements between Morocco and Spain, focusing on legal migration channels, employment opportunities, and development programs. Rather than framing migration solely as a crisis, the discourse has shifted toward viewing it as an opportunity that, when managed properly, can benefit both countries.

Hespress, in "Spain Expands Legal Work Opportunities for Moroccan Migrants" (Lakhdar), states that "as part of a new bilateral agreement, Spain has pledged to increase the number of legal work visas for Moroccan workers in sectors such as agriculture and construction." A Moroccan labor official adds, "This initiative will provide legal and safe pathways for Moroccan workers while addressing labor shortages in Spain" (Lakhdar). This framing differs with earlier narratives that depicted migration as illicit, instead portraying it as a structured process meeting economic needs.

Another article, "EU Funds Support Moroccan Border Development Programs" (Raji), explains that "European financial aid will help improve infrastructure in Moroccan border regions, creating economic alternatives to irregular migration." This positions migration governance as part of a broader economic development strategy, not just a security concern.

Hespress uses terms like "legal and safe pathways" and "bilateral agreement" to stress the benefits of structured migration. The contrast between "legal work visas" and "irregular migration" reinforces the idea of cooperation. Economic terms like "financial aid," "infrastructure development," and "employment opportunities" shift the focus from border control to economic partnership. The mention of "EU support" underscores Europe's

recognition of Morocco's role. Finally, the shift from crisis language to "economic alternatives" signals an intentional reframing. Phrases like "reducing migration pressures" replace "crackdown" rhetoric, and sources now include labor officials and economic experts, reflecting a broader, development-centered framing.

El País

Migration Crisis

In its 2021 coverage, *El País* framed the Ceuta migration surge through two key lenses: "Instrumentalized Humanitarianism," highlighting the human suffering while pointing to Morocco's political motives, and "EU Security and Spain's Sovereignty," portraying the crisis as a direct challenge to national and European territorial integrity.

Instrumentalized Humanitarianism

El País framed the Ceuta migration crisis using a dual approach that combined humanitarian storytelling with geopolitical implications. Emotionally charged language and vivid imagery depict the scale of the crisis as overwhelming and desperate. Articles such as "5,000 people swim to Ceuta amid escalating diplomatic tensions with Morocco" and "The Minors that Morocco Pushed to the Sea" describe the perilous journeys of migrants, particularly children. Phrases like "mass arrival" and "desperate crossing" reinforce the sense of urgency (Varo & Martín).

Visual narratives play a key role in this framing. Photo essays including "The Migration Crisis in Ceuta, in Images" and "Life on Both Sides of the Ceuta Border, in Images" feature photographs of exhausted migrants, torn families, and security forces managing the influx (El País). One article, "The Civil Guard Who Rescued a Baby at Sea" (Ortega Dolz), focuses on the rescue of an unresponsive infant, whose image becomes emblematic of the humanitarian dimension. Personal stories such as "Abdu: The Story of the Young Man with the Hug on the Beach of Ceuta" (Estaire) humanize the migrants. *El País* uses this frame to critique the lack of coordination between Spain and Morocco and to emphasize the moral dimensions of the crisis.

Simultaneously, *El País* frames the crisis as a product of political manipulation by Morocco. The outlet suggests that the increase in migrant crossings was not coincidental but a calculated response to Spain's hosting of Polisario Front leader Brahim Gali. In "Brahim Gali: The Saharawi Leader Hospitalized in Logroño" (Gálvez and López-Fonseca), *El País* links Morocco's actions directly to diplomatic tensions. For instance, *El País* clearly states that hosting the Sahrawi leader was "the trigger for the conflict with Morocco on the border with Ceuta." Articles such as "The Moroccan Ambassador" point out that "if Gali leaves Spain with opacity, the diplomatic conflict will worsen" (EFE). Other articles like "Morocco Recalls Its Ambassador to Spain for Consultations" (Agencias) present Morocco as using migration as a tool of pressure. Phrases such as "blackmail," "diplomatic crisis," and "worsening of relations" reinforce this narrative.

References to the 2002 Parsley Island incident underscored a longer history of tension and brinkmanship between the two countries. Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita was portrayed as a skilled diplomatic operator, described as "the firm hand of diplomacy in Morocco," suggesting a deliberate effort to exploit Spain's border vulnerabilities. Articles like "Morocco Tries to Disassociate the European Union from the Crisis with Spain" (Peregil) framed Morocco's approach as an attempt to isolate Spain. The outlet quoted the Moroccan FM, who stated, "It has nothing to do with Europe." *El País* observed that the head of Moroccan diplomacy did not, at any point, refer to the Spanish city as the "occupied enclave of Ceuta," a

phrase commonly used in most Moroccan media outlets. This combined narrative of migrants as victims and Morocco as an instigator presented the crisis as both a humanitarian emergency and a geopolitical maneuver. *El País* even quoted *Le Monde*, which stated that Morocco "has not hesitated to use the migratory weapon to put pressure on Europe," reinforcing the idea that migration was being instrumentalized as a tool of political leverage.

EU Security and Spain's Sovereignty

The second major frame focuses on the implications of the migration crisis for Spain's security and European borders. *El País* portrays Ceuta as a vulnerable frontier with geopolitical significance. "Ceuta, the Border City Disconnected from Europe" (Varo and Ruiz) and "Fnideq, the poor mirror where morocco looks towards Ceuta" (Peregil) highlight the enclave's precarious position. They frame it as a contested space caught in the shifting dynamics of international relations, positioning the crisis as a challenge to Spain's territorial sovereignty rather than a humanitarian issue. The symbolic weight of Ceuta, as both a Spanish and European entry point, is stressed throughout the coverage, underscoring its unique legal and geographical status within the Schengen zone.

Articles such as "Sánchez Travels to Ceuta and Aims to Ensure Integrity" (Cué) and "Police Patrol the Streets of Ceuta to Expel Dozens of Immigrants After an Agreement with Rabat" (Varo and Martín) depict the response of Spanish authorities as both decisive and defensive. The coverage focuses on the Spanish government's efforts to regain control of the situation, stressing the urgency of the response in light of the perceived external threat posed by Morocco. These actions are framed as necessary steps to safeguard Spain's territorial integrity and to respond to what is implicitly constructed as an encroachment on national and supranational sovereignty.

The reports invoke strong rhetoric, framing the situation in terms of defense. Words such as "reinforced borders" and "forceful response" are common (Varo and Martín; Cué). This contributes to a discourse that prioritizes border control and the protection of state sovereignty. In one article, *El País* cites police sources reporting that "every two hours, Moroccan forces open the border crossing gate and allow between 40 and 50 people to enter." Such language downplays the humanitarian aspects of the crisis, focusing instead on the immediate threat to Spain's security. The portrayal suggests that the state's primary responsibility is to ensure its own stability, sometimes at the expense of migrants' needs and rights. In another article, Morocco's Foreign Minister is quoted saying that "his country has no obligation to protect the borders of the European Union and that it is not the gendarme of Europe" (Peregil).

El País positions the crisis within a broader European security context. "Spain Approves Giving 30 Million Euros to Morocco to Stop Illegal Immigration" (Martín) suggests Spain's actions are not solely about protecting its own borders, but also about serving as a gatekeeper for the European Union. This reinforces the idea that the migration crisis has continental ramifications, with Spain playing a key role in controlling the flow of migrants into Europe. Expressions such as "to curb irregular immigration" and "to control the Atlantic route" underscore Spain's leadership in managing migratory flows. The coverage implicitly aligns Spain's national security with the EU's collective interest, portraying migration management as both a domestic responsibility and a European mandate.

Post-Recognition

Following Spain's recognition of Morocco's autonomy plan for the Sahara, *El País* introduces two new dominant frames: the Strategic Partnership and Stability frame, which underlines improved bilateral relations and diplomatic coordination between Spain and Morocco, and the

Managed Migration frame, which pins down structured cooperation in border control and the shared management of migration flows as a sign of restored mutual trust.

Strategic Partnership and Stability

Following Spain's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty, *El País* begins to frame migration as an issue managed through diplomatic cooperation, emphasizing stability in Spanish-Moroccan relations. This frame stresses the consolidation of Spain–Morocco relations, portraying Morocco as a reliable partner. The newspaper underscores the mutual benefits of this partnership, suggesting that collaboration is key to addressing shared challenges.

A key example of this frame is the coverage of customs agreements between Spain and Morocco. The article titled "Spain and Morocco Agree to Continue with Preparations to Open the Customs of Ceuta and Melilla but without Setting a Date" (González and Sanz) reflects how *El País* presents bilateral cooperation as an ongoing process rather than a point of contention. By focusing on commitment over delays, *El País* reinforces the perception of the stability of the partnership. This approach shows the importance of patience and persistence in diplomatic efforts.

Economic collaboration is presented as a stabilizing factor benefiting both nations. In the article "Spanish Companies Are Fighting to Participate in a 45,000 Million Moroccan Investment Plan" (Sanz and González), *El País* frames Morocco not as a country from which migrants flee but as an emerging economic hub that attracts Spanish businesses. This framing helps shift the migration narrative away from security threats and toward economic opportunity, suggesting that improved economic ties can contribute to long-term migration management. The newspaper subtly promotes the idea that economic growth can mitigate migration pressures.

Moreover, video analysis such as "Where Does the Relationship Between Spain and Morocco Stand?" (Doherty Luduvice) draws on diplomatic achievements rather than past tensions. This reporting style minimizes discussions on border crises and instead highlights diplomatic efforts, reinforcing the perception that migration is no longer a divisive issue but rather an area of cooperation. By focusing on progress, *El País* fosters a sense of optimism about the future of relations between Spain and Morocco.

Through this frame, *El País* aligns its coverage with the Spanish government's foreign policy objectives. By downplaying friction and emphasizing stability, the newspaper contributes to a broader discourse in which Morocco is seen as a partner rather than a pressure point for migration-related conflicts. This narrative reinforces the idea that diplomacy and collaboration are the most effective tools for managing migration.

Managed Migration

El País also presents migration as a manageable phenomenon rather than a crisis. The Managed Migration frame portrays border control, diplomatic coordination, and economic investment as effective tools for regulating migration flows. This approach reassures readers that migration is a governable process rather than a destabilizing force.

This frame is evident in the newspaper's coverage of migrant settlements within Spain. In articles like "The Inhabitants of Migrant Settlements in Níjar: Every Day We Suffer More Than the Previous One" (Sánchez), the focus shifts from migrants as security threats to migrants as individuals navigating a controlled system. The reporting recognizes migrant hardship but avoids framing it as evidence of policy breakdown, instead presenting it as part of a controllable administrative reality. This perspective humanizes migrants while emphasizing the functionality of state mechanisms.

Furthermore, when discussing border agreements, *El País* avoids alarmist narratives. The article "Spain and Morocco Agree to Continue with Preparations to Open the Customs of Ceuta and Melilla but without Setting a Date" (González and Sanz) presents migration governance as a technical rather than political issue. The newspaper stresses the diplomatic mechanisms in place to regulate migration, emphasizing continuity and coordination over disruption. Such framing advances the notion that effective policy—not reactive enforcement—is the foundation of successful migration governance**.**

Despite diplomatic tensions, *El País* highlights signs of reconciliation between Spain and Morocco. In "Mohamed VI Calls Pedro Sánchez Instead of Receiving Him in Rabat," the phone call is portrayed as a sign of lingering strain. However, a statement from the Moroccan royal cabinet expresses optimism, noting that King Mohammed VI "has welcomed the concerted evolution, trust, and mutual respect of the new phase of bilateral association." The statement further emphasizes that "bilateral relations will be intensely strengthened through concrete actions marked by effectiveness and tangible projects in strategic fields of common interest," suggesting a pivot toward cooperation, particularly in migration and economic matters (González et al.).

Overall, the Managed Migration frame in *El País* aims to instill confidence in the efficacy of diplomatic and administrative approaches to migration. It highlights a combination of bilateral agreements, economic incentives, and coordinated governance. This framing reflects Spain's post-recognition diplomatic strategy and reframes migration challenges as logistical and solvable, rather than chaotic or existential. By emphasizing structured cooperation and institutional control, the newspaper projects confidence in Spain's capacity to manage migration responsibly and proactively.

Discussion

Ceuta Migration Crisis

Both *Hespress* and *El País* covered the 2021 Ceuta migration crisis but framed it in contrasting ways, shaped by their respective national contexts. *Hespress* shows Morocco's victimhood, accusing Spain of hypocrisy and exploitation, aligning with media theories on national identity and framing (Baden 6). It relies mainly on Moroccan analysts, rarely including Spanish or EU voices—except when those sources reinforce Morocco's position. For example, when quoting Spanish claims that Morocco withdrew border enforcement, *Hespress* frames it as an external accusation, reflecting Gjerazi's concept of objectivity through attribution (61).

The outlet also employs emotional language and personal stories, portraying migrants as "abandoned" and "vulnerable," thereby amplifying humanitarian concerns in line with Nikunen's view of affective journalism (323). A headline from *Hespress* reads: "Morocco rejected my son, and I am willing to die so that he can live," capturing the desperation of a father trying to cross for his disabled child (Chamekh). Additionally, *Hespress* invokes colonial discourse, using terms such as "Spanish arrogance" and "neocolonial ambitions" to depict Spain as an imperial force. For instance, one article denounces Spain's actions as part of a "three-card trick" strategy to "undermine Moroccan sovereignty while pretending to cooperate." The crisis is framed not only as a humanitarian emergency but also as political retaliation for Spain's actions, including its hosting of Polisario leader Brahim Ghali.

In contrast, *El País*'s coverage of the crisis also focuses on humanitarian aspects but simultaneously frames the migration event as part of Morocco's geopolitical strategy. The Spanish outlet draws on official sources from both Spain and Morocco, along with international organizations, to highlight the political dimensions of the crisis. It suggests that Morocco has

"weaponized" migration to exert diplomatic pressure on Spain, particularly regarding the Sahara dispute. This narrative reflects broader European patterns of interpreting migration through the lens of security and diplomatic leverage (Miholjcic 5–6).

El País uses emotional language and vivid imagery to humanize the migrants, presenting them as victims of a larger political conflict. This framing aligns with the "spectacle of suffering" identified by Chouliaraki, in which media coverage emphasizes personal stories to evoke empathy (1). However, *El País* also frames Morocco's role as that of a coercive actor, downplaying its own migration challenges and portraying the country as strategically manipulating migration flows to gain political leverage. This reflects a Eurocentric perspective that externalizes migration management, overlooking Morocco's own complex migration dynamics (Lahlou 3-5).

Post-Recognition

The post-2023 phase, following Spain's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara, represents a significant shift in both *Hespress* and *El País*'s framing of migration. This development aligns with Badad and El-Nawawy's research, who argue that media narratives adapt to and align with shifting political realities. It illustrates the changing diplomatic landscape and evolving media coverage in response to new political developments (Voltmer 4).

For *Hespress*, the post-recognition phase signals a dramatic departure from the crisis-driven narrative of 2021. Coverage in 2023 adopts a more cooperative tone, emphasizing Morocco and Spain's shared interests in migration governance. The language used in 2023, including terms like "bilateral cooperation," "joint efforts," and "intelligence-sharing," construct a narrative of partnership rather than conflict. One article notes that "Spain has recognized Morocco's key role in stabilizing migration routes and pledged additional support," signaling a shift in tone from confrontation to mutual respect (Chamkh). This framing aligns with Mazzoleni and Schulz's theory that media adapt to changing political contexts, where shifting alliances influence coverage patterns (249).

Unlike in 2021, when *Hespress* relied heavily on Moroccan sources, the 2023 coverage incorporates a broader range of voices, including Spanish and EU officials, to reinforce the idea of cooperation. This narrative shift positions Morocco as a key player in regional migration governance, framing the country as a proactive partner rather than a passive recipient of European policy. For instance, one article cites a Spanish official stating that "his initiative will provide legal and safe pathways for Moroccan workers while addressing labor shortages in Spain" (Lakhdar). This links migration to economic opportunity and shared interest. The change corresponds to Brüggemann and D'Angelo's findings on how political transformations prompt media shifts toward cooperative and solution-oriented discourses (98). The emphasis on EU support and European financial aid further portrays Morocco as a responsible actor in managing migration, positioning the country as a key partner in addressing the root causes of migration rather than merely restricting movement.

On the other hand, *El País*'s framing shift in 2023 reflects Spain's new diplomatic stance following its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara. The coverage evolves from portraying migration as a crisis to framing it as a managed, cooperative issue. The shift from crisis framing to "Managed Migration" reflects Spain's emphasis on maintaining stability in relations with Morocco. By focusing on controlled migration flows and economic collaboration, *El País* presents Morocco as a responsible partner in managing migration. This sentiment is echoed in articles such as "Where Does the Relationship Between Spain and Morocco Stand?" by Doherty Luduvice. This approach aligns with Rodríguez-Pérez et al., who argue that Spanish media narratives adapt to government priorities, aligning coverage with diplomatic and policy objectives (164).

In this phase, both outlets move from presenting migration as a geopolitical tool to framing it as part of broader economic and security cooperation. *Hespress* emphasizes Morocco's agency and growing role in regional affairs, while *El País* highlights the economic and strategic benefits of bilateral collaboration. This shift in framing reflects Morocco's increasing importance in managing migration, with both media outlets portraying the country as a proactive player rather than a passive victim of European policies.

Conclusion

Hespress and *El País* diverge significantly in how they frame Morocco's role in irregular migration, particularly in response to shifting diplomatic developments. In its 2021 coverage, *Hespress* presents Morocco as a victim of European exploitation, emphasizing humanitarian suffering and invoking colonial legacies to critique Spain's role in the Ceuta crisis. By contrast, *El País* depicts Morocco as a calculated geopolitical actor, strategically leveraging migration to pressure Spain, especially over the Sahara issue. While *Hespress* relies on emotional appeals and nationalistic discourse, *El País* balances human interest stories with a focus on state sovereignty and EU border security.

Following Spain's 2022 recognition of Morocco's autonomy plan over the Sahara, both outlets undergo a noticeable tonal and strategic shift. *Hespress* repositions Morocco as an equal diplomatic partner, adopting a cooperative and development-oriented approach that emphasizes shared governance of migration. Simultaneously, *El País* reframes migration as a managed process within the context of restored bilateral stability, highlighting Spain's diplomatic pragmatism and economic collaboration with Morocco. Despite their differing editorial stances, both outlets ultimately converge in portraying migration not as a crisis but as a policy issue to be addressed through coordination and strategic partnership.

This comparison demonstrates how media framing responds to political realignments and reinforces national narratives through selective sourcing, emotional tone, and emphasis. The findings underscore the media's power to shape public perception and influence policy debates in geopolitically sensitive regions. For migration and media studies, the case highlights the importance of analyzing frame evolution over time, especially in contexts where media systems reflect divergent national priorities. Future research might explore audience interpretations of these frames and assess the amplifying role of social media in either sustaining or contesting mainstream narratives.

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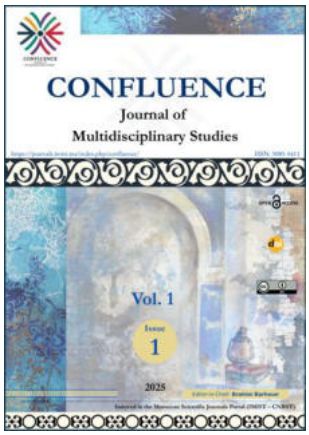
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Leadership in the Age of Content Creators and Influencers: A New Paradigm of Influence and Authority

Hafssa Chahbane[a] and Khalid Houssaini[b]
[ab]Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, FLDM, Fez, Morocco.

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Hafssa Chahbane is a doctoral researcher in Media, Communication, and Cultural Studies at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fez. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Linguistics from Cadi Ayyad University and a Master's degree in Language, Communication, and Society from the Faculty of Letters, Dhar El Mahraz, Fez. She also studied at the University of Latvia, where she broadened her interdisciplinary expertise. Hafssa was awarded the Doctoral Excellence Scholarship by the National Center for Scientific and Technical Research (CNRST).

hafssa.chahbane@usmba.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1107-1033

Khalid Houssaini is an assistant Professor. He is currently teaching Business English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the Business School, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University (USMBA), Fès. He previously taught for over ten years at the School of Arts and Humanities, Moulay Ismail University (UMI), Meknès, and also at the Faculty of Letters, Dhar El Mehraz.

khalid.houssaini@usmba.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0238-013X

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Hafssa Chahbane[a] and Khalid Houssaini[b]
[ab]Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, FLDM, Fez, Morocco.

ABSTRACT

In today's digitally connected world, social media influencers have emerged as significant agents of social change by leveraging their platforms to mobilize support for various social movements. As a result, the definition of leadership is undergoing a profound transformation. With their ability to communicate directly and at any time with a vast audience of followers, social media influencers utilize their platforms not only to share content but also to raise awareness, foster communities, and drive social change. On this basis, this article aims to examine the role of influencers in shaping contemporary activism, with a focus on the transition from online discourse, particularly through hashtags, to offline action and tangible societal impact. Drawing on theories of digital activism and leadership and through an analysis of case studies from the Moroccan scene, this article argues that influencers have redefined traditional models of leadership, offering new pathways for grassroots mobilization and democratic engagement. Additionally, the article explores how influencers use their reach to amplify marginalized voices, disseminate information, and catalyze collective action. The study further investigates the dynamics of influence, including the ethical challenges influencers face, such as navigating backlash, maintaining authenticity, and balancing advocacy with commercial interests. By critically assessing both the potential and limitations of influencer-driven movements, this work contributes to the understanding of social media's role in shaping social change in the 21st century, especially in the Moroccan context.

KEYWORDS

Activism

Influencers

Leadership

Online Discourse

Social Media

Introduction

The phenomenon of digital leadership, as embodied by Moroccan content creators and influencers, can be situated within a growing body of scholarship that explores how social media reshapes power, authority, and civic engagement globally and regionally. In the 20th century, leadership was primarily studied within the frameworks of political, military, and corporate institutions. However, the emergence of social media platforms in the 21st century has disrupted these traditional paradigms, which gave rise to a new kind of leadership embodied by digital content creators and influencers. These individuals do not necessarily possess formal authority, yet they wield considerable power in shaping public opinion, consumer behavior, and and cultural norms. As Khamis Susie, et al. argue, this shift marks a move from institutional to personal branding, where leadership is measured by engagement and trust rather than formal authority (191). Therefore, this shift demands a reassessment of what constitutes leadership in the digital era.

Contact ✉ hafssa.chahbane@usmba.ac.ma ✉ khalid.houssaini@usmba.ac.ma
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In light of this, social media has become a central platform for activism in recent years, offering new possibilities for mobilization, awareness, and engagement. Hashtags, in particular, have emerged as powerful tools in the digital activism landscape, facilitating the organization of social movements and fostering global conversations around pressing social issues. As online platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok continue to dominate the digital sphere, their influence on leadership and social change has grown significantly. This shift in the nature of leadership, one that operates beyond traditional hierarchies and institutions, has given rise to a new breed of leaders, social media influencers. These individuals, often with substantial online followings, use their platforms not only to promote personal brands but also to advocate for social justice, challenge systemic inequalities, and drive collective action.

Globally, the concept of "affective publics" refers to networked communities that coalesce around shared emotions and values expressed through social media (Papacharissi 2). This conceptualization helps us understand how influencers and content creators mobilize affective ties to challenge entrenched gender norms and cultivate feminist solidarity. Papacharissi's work highlights that leadership in digital spaces frequently relies on emotional resonance and performative authenticity rather than traditional institutional authority.

Complementing this, Alice Marwick frames social media influencers as micro-celebrities who leverage self-presentation and audience engagement to cultivate visibility and influence (114). This lens is especially relevant for understanding the extent to which Moroccan content creators negotiate the tension between personal branding and social responsibility. Thus, content creators' ability to command attention while maintaining perceived authenticity parallels Marwick's analysis of the precarious dynamics of online influence.

From a political communication perspective, according to David Karpf and Philip N. Howard, digital tools have transformed political communication by democratizing advocacy and knowledge dissemination (Karpf 23; Howard 45). In this sense, content creators' role as a mediator of political content fits within this framework. This demonstrates how influencers serve as knowledge brokers who translate complex political discourses for broader audiences, fostering informed civic participation in a region where mainstream media may be constrained.

In the context of leadership theory, scholars such as Barbara Kellerman challenge traditional, top-down notions of leadership by emphasizing the growing power of followers and the co-constructed nature of leadership relationships. This is evident in the interactive dynamics of Instagram, where Moroccan influencers' authority emerges relationally through audience engagement rather than institutional mandate. Similarly, Joseph Rost and Keith Grint highlight leadership as a process of social influence that is fluid and context-dependent, which aligns with the decentralized, participatory forms of leadership observed in the digital realm (Rost 102; Grint 15).

Turning to regional perspectives, scholars such as Lina Khatib and Fatima Sadiqi provide important cultural and socio-political frameworks for interpreting the content and impact of Moroccan influencers. In this context, Khatib's analysis of visual politics in the Arab world helps situate Fasiki's feminist illustrations as part of a broader struggle over representation and identity in postcolonial societies (33). Additionally, according to Sadiqi, gendered language use in Morocco reveals deep cultural negotiations around power, tradition, and modernity, which are echoed in women's digital activism (88).

Finally, the scholarship of Nagla Rizk on digital rights and internet governance in MENA underscores the political significance of online spaces as arenas of contestation and empowerment (Rizk 4). Consequently, Moroccan influencers operating within these digital landscapes are not only cultural actors but also participants in a broader movement toward digital citizenship and rights advocacy.

Together, these scholarly perspectives deepen our understanding of Moroccan digital leadership as a multifaceted phenomenon that integrates cultural expression, political mediation,

technological education, and community engagement. They highlight that leadership in digital spaces is less about formal authority and more about the ability to influence meaning, mobilize affect, and foster participatory dialogue. This signals a shift, which is particularly pronounced in regions like Morocco, where social media often supplements or challenges traditional public spheres.

Hashtags as a Form of Digital Activism

The phenomenon of hashtag activism is a relatively recent development that has witnessed profound growth in the study of social movements. Hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #ClimateStrike, and #TimesUp have become rallying cries for social movements that transcend national borders and local communities, which has paved the way for a platform where marginalized groups can amplify their voices. According to Tufekci, these digital mobilizations bypass traditional media channels, enabling a more direct, participatory form of political activism (4). In this sense, scholars have argued that hashtags create a form of "networked protest" that enables the rapid dissemination of information, coordination of collective actions, and the ability to shift the focus of public discourse quickly (Bennett and Segerberg 750). However, while hashtag activism has demonstrated its ability to mobilize large numbers of people, critics like Morozov have questioned whether it represents meaningful social change or merely a form of "slacktivism," a surface-level engagement that lacks the depth and sustainability of traditional activism (45).

Leadership in the Digital Age

The emergence of social media as a platform for activism has fundamentally altered our understanding of leadership in social movements. Traditional models of leadership have emphasized formal structures, authority, and established hierarchies, with recognized figures at the forefront of change. However, in the digital era, leadership is increasingly decentralized, and anyone with access to an online platform can assume a leadership role. Social media influencers, individuals who build substantial followings through their digital presence, have become pivotal figures in shaping public opinion and driving social change. Studies have highlighted the way influencers and content creators can steer public conversations, influence political discourse, and galvanize social movements through personal branding, engagement with followers, and strategic use of social media (Loader et al. 120; van Dijk 98). This demonstrates the manner through which influencers challenge the traditional model of leadership which is operated via creating informal, decentralized networks of influence that prioritize authenticity, relatability, and direct engagement with followers (Marwick 114).

Social Media, Social Movements, and Social Change

Social movements have historically relied on physical gatherings, print media, and face-to-face communication to advocate for change. However, in the digital age, social media has expanded the tools available for organizing and mobilizing around social causes. The connection between social media and social movements is multifaceted, with platforms serving as both venues for protest and spaces for ongoing political engagement (Castells 23). Nonetheless, Fuchs argues that while social media enables rapid dissemination of ideas and facilitates global solidarity, it also creates challenges, such as the risk of fragmentation, digital surveillance, and the commercialization of activism (102). Moreover, scholars such as Juris argue that digital platforms offer new opportunities for cross-border collaboration, while others, like Fuchs,

emphasize that digital activism may be co-opted for commercial or political interests, thereby diluting its potential for genuine social change (Juris 13; Fuchs 106).

Furthermore, social movements in the digital era are not limited to large-scale global protests but include smaller, more localized initiatives that leverage digital tools for awareness-raising, advocacy, and policy change. From climate justice movements to feminist campaigns, social media has empowered individuals and collectives to challenge entrenched systems of power and advocate for structural change. However, the intersection of leadership, social media, and social movements remains complex. Influencers who advocate for social justice often navigate tensions between their activism and commercial interests, raising questions about the ethical responsibilities of influencers in shaping public opinion and the potential for the commodification of social change (Banet-Weiser 89).

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how content creators and influencers embody new forms of leadership on Instagram, with a particular focus on the Moroccan context. The methodological approach draws on digital ethnography and case study analysis, combining observational data from social media with contextual insights from academic literature and media sources.

The research was guided by purposive sampling, which was designed to capture a diverse range of Moroccan influencers and content creators who demonstrate visible leadership qualities in the digital sphere. Four influencers and content creators were selected. The chosen participants represent various thematic domains, including gender, politics, education, creative arts, and activism. The selection was not random, but it was based on a number of criteria such as their Moroccan nationality or residence, their active presence on Instagram, with a consistent posting (at least once per week), A minimum followers' list of 100,000 that ensures public reach and engagement, and content reflecting leadership-related traits such as authenticity, social responsibility, and vision.

Instagram posts, stories, and engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) from selected Moroccan influencers and content creators were analyzed to identify patterns of communication, audience interaction, and expressions of leadership traits, including authenticity, vision, and social engagement. This method allows for an understanding of how digital leadership is performed and perceived in an organic, real-time environment. In this sense, several Moroccan content creators, such as lifestyle influencers, educators, and activists, were observed to provide real-life examples of the new leadership paradigm. Their digital presence and content themes were used to ground theoretical discussions in localized, practical illustrations.

By drawing from principles of constructivist grounded theory, data analysis was conducted through thematic coding. Content was analyzed along the following three key dimensions:

1. Communication strategies: narrative style, visual aesthetics, and tone.
2. Audience interaction: the nature and depth of engagement with followers.
3. Leadership performance: the way content creators/influencers express values, authenticity, community engagement, and social advocacy.

Last but not least, codes were developed inductively from the data and then interpreted in light of leadership theory, particularly frameworks on transformational and participatory leadership. The emphasis was on understanding how influencers negotiate cultural expectations, personal identity, and public influence through their digital personas. This multi-source, interpretive approach enables a rich understanding of how digital leadership is shaped and signified in the Moroccan social media landscape.

Results and Analysis

With the emergence of social media, the rise of content creators as digital leaders signals a shift in the global understanding of authority and influence, and Morocco is no exception to this trend. Within the Moroccan context, where traditional leadership is often associated with politics, academia, or religious authority, social media has opened a parallel space for informal leadership. To explain, young Moroccan influencers, including lifestyle bloggers, social activists, gender activists, and educators, have carved out niches of influence that challenge the exclusivity of conventional leadership roles. Consequently, this digital space enables more grassroots leadership, particularly among young people and women, who often face structural barriers in traditional settings.

Like their global counterparts, Moroccan content creators build influence through audience engagement rather than formal power. Creators such as Zainab Fasiki, Amine Aouni, Loubna El Jaouhari, and Merouane attract large followings by connecting with their audiences in Darija (Moroccan Arabic), sharing culturally relevant content, and addressing issues that resonate with everyday experiences, including gender, education, mental health, and social justice. As a result, content creators' ability to engage authentically gives them credibility and a form of digital leadership that is built through connective action.

This article's findings reveal the important role Instagram plays in promoting Moroccan identity and culture. For example, creators use visual storytelling to highlight Moroccan fashion, cuisine, music, and traditions while also engaging with global trends. Furthermore, this balance between local and global content boosts the visibility of Moroccan culture and fosters the emergence of cultural ambassadors online. By doing so, these creators assume leadership roles in cultural diplomacy, shaping how Morocco is perceived both domestically and internationally.

Throughout the sample, whether participants identify as "influencers" or "content creators," there is a collective recognition of the vital social role they play in contemporary Moroccan society. Participants consistently expressed awareness of their increasing visibility, influence, and responsibility, and many acknowledged that they are increasingly seen by their audiences not just as entertainers or educators but also as leaders in their respective fields.

This leadership takes multiple forms. For instance, Fasiki, an illustrator and activist, uses her digital platform to challenge gender norms and promote body positivity and women's rights. Her work actively contributes to public discourse around feminism and gender equality in Morocco, positioning her as a leader in a broader socio-cultural movement aimed at transforming how women are viewed and treated in public and private life. As Marwick and Papacharissi argue, digital leadership is often affective and performative (Marwick 114; Papacharissi 15). Fasiki cultivates emotional resonance with followers who see their own experiences, frustrations, or aspirations reflected in her work. This fosters a sense of digital solidarity, empowering audiences to challenge internalized norms. Leadership here lies in the capacity to foster critical consciousness and collective identity.

Moreover, to use Bourdieu's terms, Fasiki acts as a "cultural intermediary" (365), translating feminist and rights-based frameworks into locally resonant visual and narrative forms. Through comics, illustrations, and storytelling, she reclaims representations of the female body, critiques patriarchy, and resists censorship. This positions her as a symbolic leader in the cultural production, where she aims to represent marginalized voices and reshape symbolic boundaries around gender and visibility.

As discussed by theorists like Joanne Ciulla and Ronald Heifetz, a key trait in theories of ethical leadership is civic courage (Ciulla 20; Heifetz 177). This is exemplified in Fassiki's persistence in the face of backlash. Hence, in societies where challenging social norms,

particularly around gender and sexuality, can result in harassment, threats, or censorship, the willingness to speak out becomes a form of moral leadership.

In the political domain, figures like Aouni serve as knowledge brokers, translating complex political texts, policies, and current events into accessible and engaging content for a broader public. His efforts to mediate political information and foster civic understanding reflect a form of informational leadership that bridges the gap between formal institutions and the digital public sphere. By decoding complex political language, laws, and governmental decisions into accessible formats, Aouni enhances political literacy, particularly among young people and marginalized digital publics who might otherwise be excluded from formal political discourse.

This role positions him as a civic educator and mediator who aims at enhancing participatory engagement in public life, a trait associated with what Kellerman would describe as non-positional leadership, where influence is exercised without holding formal authority (Kellerman 6). This type of leadership is characterized by influence that does not stem from institutional authority, but rather from discursive power, digital credibility, and public trust.

Aouni's platform fosters relational credibility, which is considered a cornerstone of contemporary leadership models (Grint 25). By offering reliable, transparent, and audience-responsive content, Aouni cultivates a form of horizontal leadership, where legitimacy is co-produced with followers through affective engagement, civic relevance, and consistency.

El Jehouari's leadership is embodied through her creation and curation of the "Je Suis Une Femme" movement, which provides a digital platform for Moroccan women to speak out about experiences of rape, harassment, marginalization, and systemic inequality. In doing so, she fulfills the role of a movement catalyst where she does not merely aim at amplifying individual testimonies, but weaves them into a shared narrative of resistance and social transformation.

The "Je Suis Une Femme" movement, founded by El Jehouari, exemplifies a powerful form of grassroots digital leadership in Morocco. By being more than just a hashtag or campaign, the movement has become a collective platform for testimony, solidarity, and resistance. It has become a safe place where women are encouraged to publicly share their experiences of rape, harassment, and systemic gender-based oppression.

Through this platform, El Jehouari acts as a transformational leader who inspires followers not by authority but through mobilizing shared values, emotional resonance, and a vision for social justice. As a result, the movement has cultivated a growing digital following that interacts with, supports, and amplifies the message, indicating a shift from passive spectatorship to active engagement.

Another notable example is Merouane Lamharzi, a Moroccan content creator who has carved out a distinct niche by producing educational content on artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies. His work emphasizes a commitment to demystifying complex technological concepts and making them accessible to a broader, often non-specialist audience. Through engaging visuals, simplified explanations, and contextualized examples, Lamharzi plays a critical role in bridging the knowledge gap between technical developments and public understanding.

Lamharzi's digital presence embodies a form of educational and epistemic leadership, where he assumes the responsibility of translating abstract global discussions about AI into content that resonates with Moroccan youth. By doing this, he contributes to digital literacy, stimulates public curiosity, and provides his audience with the conceptual tools needed to engage in future-oriented debates about automation, data ethics, and innovation.

In the rapidly evolving field of artificial intelligence, Merouane assumes the role of a public educator and digital translator of specialized knowledge. By creating accessible and engaging content that demystifies AI, including its functions, risks, societal implications, and future trajectories, Lamharzi fosters technological literacy among his followers. This act of simplifying expert knowledge and grounding it in local and ethical concerns aligns with what

scholars like Henry Jenkins et al. term participatory knowledge leadership (45). This is where audiences are not just passive recipients but co-navigators of complex information landscapes. His efforts demonstrate how content creators can influence not only cultural or political dialogue but also technological awareness and future preparedness, reaffirming the argument that digital leadership today encompasses knowledge dissemination and the democratization of expertise.

These cases illustrate how Moroccan content creators are redefining leadership in the digital age, transcending commercial influence to adopt civic, cultural, and ideological roles. Their work not only shapes public opinion but also fosters dialogue, raises awareness, and mobilizes communities around critical issues. This form of digital leadership is particularly significant in contexts where traditional forms of authority are being challenged and social media has become a powerful platform for participatory engagement and grassroots transformation.

Many Moroccan content creators have leveraged their platforms for social impact, aligning with a broader global shift toward purpose-driven content. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, influencers led health awareness campaigns. Additionally, during the 2023 Al Haouz earthquake, several content creators led movements and mobilized support and donations for the affected communities. These actions demonstrate that digital leadership in Morocco can extend beyond entertainment and make a meaningful contribution to civic engagement.

Despite their growing influence, Moroccan creators face unique challenges. Access to monetization tools is more limited due to regional restrictions, and algorithmic biases often disadvantage content in non-Western languages, such as Arabic or Tamazight. Additionally, the lack of regulatory frameworks around digital influence in Morocco raises concerns about misinformation, content ethics, and accountability. Therefore, the sustainability of this new leadership model depends on digital literacy, platform accessibility, and institutional support.

As social media continues to evolve, it is increasingly evident that leadership in social movements is no longer confined to institutional or hierarchical structures. Influencers and everyday individuals now can lead, inspire, and enact change through the use of digital platforms. The role of these influencers in social movements raises important questions about the nature of leadership in the 21st century, including the balance between personal branding and activism, the ethics of influencer-driven campaigns, and the long-term sustainability of digital activism. This article will examine how social media influencers are driving social movements, the challenges they encounter in maintaining authenticity while advocating for change, and the broader implications of digital activism for the future of leadership and social change.

This study intervenes in the evolving discourse on leadership by examining the role of digital content creators and influencers through the lens of contemporary leadership theory. While a substantial body of literature has explored the marketing, communicative, and cultural dimensions of influencer activity (Abidin 42; Boerman et al. 103), comparatively little attention has been directed toward positioning influencers as actors within leadership frameworks. This article seeks to fill that gap by offering an analytical synthesis of leadership theory and digital media practices, thereby reconceptualizing the influencer as a novel form of leader shaped by the dynamics of the platform economy.

The article also introduces the conceptual figure of the hybrid leader: a person who navigates both the symbolic economy of influence and the formal structures of enterprise, governance, or public intellectualism. This emergent leadership archetype highlights the convergence of digital fluency with traditional forms of authority, suggesting a paradigmatic shift in the way leadership is conceptualized and practiced across various sectors. Notably, the hybrid leader encapsulates both performative and strategic dimensions of leadership, employing the aesthetics of authenticity and relatability while engaging in long-term brand-building, strategic communication, and often formal institutional leadership.

Conclusion

The rise of content creators and influencers signals a paradigm shift in the way leadership is defined, enacted, and perceived. This type of leadership is characterized by the fact that it surpasses organizational charts or titles. Hence, with their ability to emerge from bedrooms, studios, or coffee shops, today's most influential leaders are armed not with degrees or mandates but with authenticity, creativity, and the ability to mobilize communities at scale. As the boundaries between entertainment, education, and enterprise continue to blur, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers must recognize and study these new forms of leadership. The influencer is not a passing trend, but a reflection of more profound shifts in authority, trust, and engagement in the digital age.

This article aims to reconceptualize leadership in the digital age by centering on content creators and influencers as emergent leaders operating outside traditional organizational structures. Drawing on leadership theory, digital media studies, and platform analysis, it has been argued that influencer leadership is not merely an epiphenomenon of celebrity culture, but a substantive and evolving form of authority that has been established through the content creator's followers and the kind of impact they have.

By offering a localized, empirically grounded analysis of Moroccan content creators as civic actors, this study contributes to the growing literature on digital leadership in the Moroccan context. Through a qualitative, interpretive lens, the article illustrates how digital figures mobilize their platforms to educate, inspire, and challenge dominant narratives. It has traced how influencers such as Fasiki, Aouni, and Merouane leverage social media affordances to challenge normative discourses around gender, politics, and technology. These cases demonstrate that leadership in the digital sphere is not rooted in institutional authority, but rather in the capacity to cultivate trust, mobilize emotions, and engage the public in meaningful dialogue. The research shows that digital leadership is neither monolithic nor apolitical. Instead, it is situated, intersectional, and performative, shaped by the socio-political landscape, cultural expectations, and platform affordances.

By foregrounding the situated and performative nature of digital leadership, this article contributes to broader debates in media and cultural studies that increasingly view leadership as relational, networked, and contingent (Marwick 45; Papacharissi 78; Rost 199). At the same time, it engages with regional scholarship that recognizes digital platforms as contested political terrains in postcolonial and transitional societies (Khatib 22; Sadiqi 53; Rizk 78). Moroccan influencers do not merely reflect societal change; they actively contribute to it. In fact, they participate in its articulation by often negotiating the boundaries of visibility, censorship, and audience expectation.

However, a critical analysis must also acknowledge the ambiguities that shape this form of digital influence. While content creators can spark civic awareness and social debate, they are also embedded within platform economies that monetize visibility, reward algorithmic conformity, and blur the distinction between authenticity and branding. The neoliberal conditions under which influencers operate often pressure them to conform to market logic, potentially undermining their political effectiveness or limiting their ability to dissent. Furthermore, the influence they wield is unevenly distributed, influenced by factors such as gender, class, linguistic capital, and access to digital infrastructures.

The added value of this study lies in its theoretical synthesis and its challenge to the institutional bias in leadership studies. By situating influencer activity within the broader discourse on charismatic, distributed, and entrepreneurial leadership, this article lays the groundwork for further empirical and conceptual inquiry into the modalities of digital leadership. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of critically examining the structural and

ethical aspects of influencer leadership, particularly in relation to sustainability, accountability, and labor precarity. As digital infrastructures continue to mediate public life and leadership itself, understanding the dynamics of influence, trust, and authority on these platforms becomes an urgent interdisciplinary task.

The findings open several avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies could track how content creators evolve in response to platform changes, algorithmic pressures, or shifts in the political landscape. Second, comparative studies between Moroccan influencers and those from other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries could shed light on regional patterns of digital civic engagement. Ultimately, greater attention should be devoted to audience reception and participation, examining how followers interpret, internalize, or resist the leadership exhibited by these figures.

More importantly, this study lays the groundwork for a deeper examination of how leadership and civic participation are being reshaped in digital Morocco. However, its reliance on observable content and publicly available data limits it. Therefore, future research could adopt audience-centered approaches to better understand how followers interpret and engage with these expressions of leadership. Furthermore, conducting comparative studies across North Africa or the larger Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region would be beneficial in evaluating how cultural and political contexts influence the capabilities of digital platforms. Other researchers could investigate these dynamics through empirical case studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and longitudinal analyses, with a particular focus on the gendered, racialized, and geopolitical aspects of influencer leadership. By doing so, scholars can more effectively account for how leadership in the 21st century is not just conveyed but fundamentally constructed within digital environments.

All in all, in an era where traditional forms of authority are increasingly distrusted and where civic participation is both constrained and reimagined through digital media, Moroccan influencers exemplify a shifting paradigm where leadership emerges not from formal position but through discursive resonance, digital visibility, and relational credibility. This evolving model invites scholars, educators, and policymakers alike to reconsider how leadership is cultivated and contested in contemporary networked societies. It also raises critical questions about the sustainability and ethics of influence in algorithm-driven environments, where visibility is the platform's logic shapes contingent and public discourse. As digital publics become key sites of political socialization and cultural negotiation, understanding the dynamics of influencer-led leadership is no longer peripheral but relatively central to grasping the future of civic life and participation in Morocco and beyond.

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Exploring the Experiences of International Solo Women Travelers to Morocco

Aicha Bouchara[a] and Jihane Benmassoud[b]
[a]Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco; [b]Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco

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Aicha Bouchara is professor at the Department of Languages and Communication at the Faculty of Sciences and Techniques (FST) in Tangier. She is a researcher in gender studies.

abouchara@uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0336-5637

Jihane Benmassoud is a professor at the English Department at Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Marrakech. She is a researcher in Education and Applied Linguistics.

j.benmassoud@uca.ma https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9631-616X

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Aicha Bouchara[a] and Jihane Benmassoud[b]

[a]Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco; [b]Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco

ABSTRACT

The growing phenomenon of solo women travelers has demonstrated equal travel opportunities between men and women. It has also contributed to promoting the cultural image and economic development within the tourism sectors of many countries. Having a tremendous tourism potential, Morocco is a favorite destination for International solo women travelers. Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the experiences of international solo female travelers to Morocco before, during, and after traveling. The theoretical approach used is focused on feminist, postcolonial, and tourism studies. A qualitative method is adopted through a semi-structured and in-depth interview technique with a convenience sampling of 20 international solo female travelers. Results show that the respondents' motivations include cultural understanding, experiential learning, and empowerment. They reported that their interactions with local people were positive. However, their experiences reflect ambivalence towards public services such as transportation and tour guiding. The issue of safety emerged as a recurring theme as the majority faced sexual and physical violence in the public space. This study, therefore, contributes to the understanding of women's contemporary travel experience and informs the different stakeholders about the challenges international solo female travelers confront in Morocco. Implementing effective solutions is expected to advance Morocco's tourism objectives and accelerate the practical realization of Sustainable Development Goals.

KEYWORDS

Solo women travelers

Tourism

International women

Morocco

Female experiences

Safety

Introduction

Women's access to travel opportunities has been limited for centuries. Traditionally, due to gender roles, women were not permitted to travel alone, particularly to foreign countries. Travel was not considered an entertaining journey but a necessity, often undertaken by families seeking better living conditions. During the colonial era, women typically traveled with their families which sometimes allowed them to accompany husbands or fathers who were ambassadors or merchants. At that time, leisure travel was predominantly a male domain with painters, writers, and explorers leading the way. Their adventures have been a subject of research and critical literature for centuries. In contemporary times, travel conditions have improved significantly due to tourism policies and strategies in many countries, including the Kingdom of Morocco.

Contact ✉ abouchara@uae.ac.ma ✉ j.benmassoud@uca.ma
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With its UNESCO recognized historic landmarks, diverse destinations, and a mosaic of rich cultural heritage – encompassing architecture, gastronomy, fashion, crafts, traditions, music, and hospitality – Morocco has attracted a growing number of international solo women travelers. Despite this emerging phenomenon, there are few studies on female travelers to Morocco. Karla A. Henderson asserts that although leisure began to emerge over a decade earlier, research, specifically focused on women's leisure, did not appear until the early 1980s (13).

This period coincides with feminist movements and women's rights advocacy which permitted a considerable change in gender roles in many societies around the globe. This transformation has had an impact on the leisure and tourism industries through the democratization of equal travel opportunities for men and women, and more specifically, the rise of women traveling around the world without a male companion or supervisor, who are usually family members.

Women's roles, which are family-oriented and limited to the private space, have been dissolving in many societies, thus opening possibilities for women to think and act beyond them. In fact, the right to access the public space, its facilities, and services has enabled women in many parts of the world to participate actively in many facets of socio-economic and political life. The right to education and employment have further allowed many women to improve their socio-economic conditions. Moreover, access and use of technology and internet-based travel content such as blogs, videos, apps, and websites have enabled more and more women to gather information about different cultures, countries, and travel conditions. Another factor which has encouraged women to travel to many destinations is the presence of modernized tourist facilities such as accommodation, transportation, tours, leisure and cultural activities, etc. The convenience of these services forms favorable conditions for women to consider traveling alone.

Travel has been viewed to have positive benefits ranging from pleasure to health benefits to experiential learning (Ng and Ho 61). Mathew Stone and James F. Petrick highlighted how travel improved knowledge and skills, self-confidence, and adaptability (151). Thus, travel is an empowering life experience as it shapes learning, personality, and behavior. However, travel can be a dangerous endeavor and a source of anxiety. Early 21st-century studies have shown that travelers' decisions to travel abroad are influenced by their travel anxiety levels and perceived safety (Reisinger and Mavondo 32). On the contrary, more recent studies showed that "physical risk, financial risk, and socio-psychological risk did not affect visit intention" (Khan et al. 359).

Solo tourism, particularly among women, has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments in the tourism industry (Shukor and Kattiyapornpong 388; Umur 256), driven by motivations such as independence, self-discovery, and empowerment (Umur 266; Silva et al.). Despite a progressive growth, empirical research on solo women travelers remained limited in the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, with few studies exploring their unique experiences combining social interaction, adventure, education, and self-understanding (Bond 3). Other research has focused on the constraints they face including some elements related to their home environments, personal limitations such as self-doubt and vulnerability, and practical challenges related to finances, absence of knowledge about the destination's local culture, and fatigue (Wilson 114).

In recent years, there has been more and more scientific interest towards solo female travelers. Asian academia has been extensively researching this problematic. Ilinka Terziyska explored the different reasons which drive Asian and Australian women to travel alone (114). A study focused on the normalization of unsafety for solo female travelers in countries like India (Thomas and Mura 35) while another revealed that solo female travelers in South-East Asian countries were concerned not only about gender-based violence but also with racialized risks which they were able to negotiate during travel (Yang et al. 40).

Despite the growing scientific research about this problematic, there is a noticeable gap in research related to the Moroccan context. There is a lack of knowledge about the motivations, experiences and challenges which face solo international women travelers in Morocco. Therefore, this article explores how international women experience solo travel to the Kingdom of Morocco through investigating the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons behind women's solo travel to the country?
2. What are their expectations prior to travel?
3. What kind of experiences do they undergo during the trip?
4. What are their post-journey impressions?

This study contributes to gaining knowledge on different solo international women's experiences with travel to Morocco and informs the different stakeholders on the challenges and possible solutions to offer a favorable travel experience to them.

Literature Review

This review explores key theories related to gender and travel, examining postcolonial perspectives on travel writing, the difference between a tourist and a traveler, and gender and feminist readings of travel literature. It further explores studies on global women's solo travel experiences before situating the discussion within the Moroccan context, including tourism strategies and security conditions for women.

According to Michael C. Hall and Hazel Tucker, the experience of tourism "reinforces and is embedded in postcolonial relationships" and therefore revolves around issues of identity, contestation and representation (2). In fact, these three problematics arise from the postcolonial landscape and from the very nature of travel, which is an in-between space where the individual's vision of the world can be constantly challenged.

First, it is essential to discuss how postcolonial theory dissected the travel literature produced by Orientalists. It is indeed a colonial and post-colonial heritage that has influenced the representation of the Orient and non-Western countries. One of the prominent critics of Orientalism is Edward Said, who traced how every author writing about the Orient assumes "some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies" (Said 36). For him, such written texts (literary and visual) become discourses forming "strength and authority" by producing and re-producing a dehumanizing representation of an Orient which "has remained fixed in time and place for the west" (111). This otherness is what makes a destination worthy of consumption (Hall and Tucker 8). Travelers and tourists are attracted to the exotic culture and landscape which they have "always already" internalized, to borrow Althusser's term (145), because of the Western canon that has been constantly reproducing the same stereotypes about the Orient/ East.

Western media representation of Arabs and Muslims is a good example of this. Jack Shaheen explains how these two groups, who have different cultures and traditions, are considered to be a homogenous entity by Hollywood cinema (173). Shaheen traced decades of recycling preferred images of Arabs as terrorists, oil billionaires, buffoons, sexual predators who live in exotic places where flying carpets, lamp genies, desert locations, and camels are commonplace (177). The Western traveler/tourist has been exposed to and has internalized many stereotypical representations, which create ambivalent feelings towards this mysterious East. This legacy of representation of the Orient is one component that may affect the travel motivation of solo women travelers to non-Western countries.

Another concept to discuss is the problematic nature of naming a Western individual traveling to the Orient as "tourist" or "traveler." Beverly A. Simmons explains how the male

Western-centric discourse projects the idea that the two identities, tourist and traveler, merge into one entity (46). However, these are completely different as the meaning of a traveler is the one who engages all their senses, participates in authentic relationships with locals, and seeks self-discovery and experimentation. A tourist, on the other hand, is the construction of a contemporary travel discourse.

For Simmons, contemporary travel discourse is composed of four elements: privilege, desire, sightseeing, and fanciful play. Privilege is based on the superiority of Western tourists in non-Western lands, in which "they are a travelling social elite and that places are already familiar and readily available to them" (Simmons 45). Desire is the longing to escape modernism and feel nostalgic about the past. This would project the idea that non-Western destinations are non-modern, unaffected by globalization and socio-economic and political transformations. Sightseeing refers to the fact that tourists are spectators of the visited place so that "place and local inhabitants are shaped in picturesque and exotic narratives that are designed to seduce tourists" (46). The last element is fanciful play, which is described as the result of the three previous elements. The tourist, therefore, imagines that he enjoys a certain degree of freedom in foreign lands, unlike in their homeland. Simmons points out that "By pretending that tourists are not tourists but travelers, this discourse encourages tourists to ignore the reality of power relations within modern tourism such as their dependence on the travel industry, or their relationships of power with locals as they might actually exist" (48). Thus, a traveler is the one who is free from being dependent on tourist facilities and who constructs authentic encounters with the culture visited. This viewpoint of the distinction between a tourist and traveler is particularly interesting as it forms a critical analysis of male travel narratives. However, there is a lack of extensive research on how this difference is valid for female travel narratives and experiences.

Women's travel experiences were invisible to and trivialized in the colonial narratives. Their roles were minor and limited to domesticity and romantic objects of desire. Alternatively, their experiences were bound by seeking the same objectives as the privileged white man (adventure, freedom, exploration), thereby erasing their identity and uniqueness (Simmons 48-50). Moreover, despite the fact that many Western female travel narratives existed during the 19th century, postcolonial male criticism (such as Said's and others) excluded them from discourse analysis.

It is thanks to feminist criticism that these narratives gained visibility. Several feminist critics considered these texts to be a counterpoint to male-authored texts, to portray strong female role models, to present factual events, and to depict the female authors as individuals free from the constraints of Victorian society and the history of colonialism (Mills 29). Yet, this feminist reading is reductive as it omits the colonial framework. In fact, Sara Mills explains that these texts should not be considered biographical, but rather as experiences and representations. Further, acknowledging the colonial framework from which women's travel narratives emanate, Mills affirms that these narratives "cannot be said to speak from outside colonial discourse, but their relation to the dominant discourse is problematic because of its conflict with the discourses of 'femininity', which were operating on them in equal, and sometimes stronger, measure" (61-63).

However, some feminist critics and female travel writers disidentify with colonial ideologies. Simone Fullagar explains that her travel to Nepal was a quest for identity and describes how travel embodies vulnerability through an "abandonment of self to wandering, and the mastery of surmounting the unknown" (62). Fullagar admits belonging to a Western background of colonial history and ideology but does not identify with that heritage as she perceives the world from different other perspectives that prove an instability of identity and unfixed cultural encounters. She asserts that her "desire for otherness does not exist outside a western imagining

of eastern cultures but it does reveal an ambivalent disidentification with colonial origins and a complex interplay between gender, class and culture" (Fullagar 61). Consequently, Western female travelers' experiences form a mosaic of components: the colonial background, the seeking for self-discovery, the constraints of gender politics and its intersectionality with class, race, and other socio-cultural constructs.

In the 21st century, quantitative and qualitative studies on solo women travelers showed that various reasons motivate them to travel alone. Some of these are education, adventure, socializing with people from other cultures, self-discovery and a desire for autonomy (Chiang and Jogaratnam 68; Pereira and Silva). Other reasons are related to women's well-being, including overcoming depression and bringing positive energy and happiness back to their lives (Hamid et al. 1-13; Pereira and Silva; Seow and Brown 1190). These findings show that women travel alone not only to discover new places but also to interact closely with the cultures visited and learn from them. This seems to break tradition with previous male and female travelers' narratives.

Concerning the challenges faced, it has been found that one of the main issues these women face is a feeling of insecurity and lack of safety. This latter is manifested in risks of violent crimes, verbal and sexual harassment, and theft (Bianchi 200; Yang 2460; Su and Wu 380). The fear of this danger increases women's vigilance and has restrictive consequences for their freedom of movement in public spaces.

In their study of solo British and American women travelers, Fiona Jordan and Heather Gibson adopt a post-structuralist approach, analyzing women's travel experiences in relation to the gender relations of surveillance, resistance, and empowerment (206). They point out that these solo women travelers experienced themselves as being the object of the male gaze, which even made some of them confine themselves to their hotel rooms to avoid it. Jordan and Gibson explain:

> Many of the women were conscious that they were the subject of sexual speculation because of their solo presence in the sexualized and potentially liminoid spaces of tourism. They worried that their singleness signaled availability and constructed them as the subjects of unwanted sexual attention of men in the places they visited. (206)

However, some travelers showed resistant techniques. They refused to adopt a passive attitude and were present in the space, while others wore wedding rings despite being single to discourage harassers. Others grabbed a book or a magazine which "provided a legitimate activity for being in such public tourism spaces" (20). The reading activity made them less self-conscious and drove away the male gaze, as being alone in a public space was conceived as eliciting sexual attention. In fact, recent ethnographic research found that the feeling of security is enhanced based on not only the destination's reputation for safety and the presence of other solo female travelers, but more importantly, on safety strategies adopted (Ghadban et al.). Examples of these strategies include informing their families back home of their location and avoiding sharing personal information with strangers while traveling (Ghadban et al.). These types of studies have been conducted in various cultural contexts from Europe to Asia. However, there is limited knowledge about Morocco as a destination for solo female travelers.

One case study was explored by Sian Stephens who, during her travel to Morocco, describes an unsafe experience in which she respected cultural rules and adapted her behavior by dressing in a conservative way, ignoring unwanted attention, and being courteous and polite to reduce the male gaze and the risk of sexual harassment. However, despite these strategies, she still felt unsafe and affirms that she has "reached the difficult conclusions that [she] should not seek out

cultures where an 'unaccompanied' woman in public is upsetting to those she encounters" (Stephens 138).

Unsafety in public spaces is the result of violence which is a pressing problem in Morocco. According to the High Commission for Planning, gender-based violence represents 56.5%, of which 49% is psychological, 14% is sexual, and 13% is physical (28). Different forms, such as sexual harassment, groping, attempted rape, and rape, happen in the public space with a rate of 12.6% (High Commission for Planning 128). In light of these figures, the issue of gender-based violence underscores the intersection between safety in the public space for women and Morocco's broader ambitions in the tourism sector. Morocco has implemented a national tourism strategy aimed at positioning the country among the world's top 15 travel destinations (Ministry of Tourism). With a target of 26 million tourists by 2030, the kingdom has already welcomed 17.4 million visitors in 2024, a 20% increase from the previous year, highlighting its growing appeal (Ministry of Tourism). The strategy emphasizes sustainable economic development through collaboration between the public and private sectors, local communities, and international partners. Moreover, the Ministry of Tourism has made considerable efforts to regulate the profession of tour guiding through Law 05.12, which stipulates specific requirements for entering and practicing the profession. The ministry affirms that "the tour guide plays a key role in showcasing and promoting Morocco's natural and cultural heritage. They act as a cultural ambassador of the destination to tourists" (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). In order to combat unauthorized tour guides, who can affect Morocco's image, the ministry has published the list of licensed tour guides, approved by the ministry, on its official website. Moreover, the ministry has provided a continuous training capacity program for authorized tourist guides. Another important strategy concerns the means of transportation, a key component used by international solo female travelers in Morocco. The Ministry of Transport and Logistics' strategy for the period 2023-2026 focuses on developing public infrastructure, including roads, railways, airports, and maritime transport. In addition to improving governance and administrative management, the ministry adopts an "inclusive and sustainable mobility" (Ministry of Transport and Logistics, 2023). However, achieving this vision requires addressing the safety concerns that deter solo female tourists, a demographic that contributes significantly to the industry's growth.

Although existing research has explored the experiences of solo women travelers in various cultural contexts, Morocco's unique position as both a rapidly growing tourist destination (Ministry of Tourism) and a setting where gender-based violence remains prevalent (High Commission for Planning, 128) signals a critically overlooked dimension in the literature. While studies have identified that young, single urban women are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence (128), little empirical research has investigated how safety concerns intersect with the experiences of international female solo travelers in Morocco. These strategies are particularly essential given the country's ambitious tourism development goals and the increasing global trend of solo female travel.

Research Methodology

To address the objective of investigating the experiences of solo international women travelers before, during, and after visiting Morocco, this study adopts a qualitative research design. It is used when research needs to explore the experiences, testimonials, feelings, and beliefs of a certain population. Moreover, in order to collect data from a diverse population, in this case international women, a qualitative design enables us to delve deeply into "how people interpret their experiences … and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Tisdell et al. 8).

One qualitative data collection technique that allows the researcher to interpret the meaning of the respondent's perspective is interviewing (Kvale 326). The choice made for this study is semi-structured interviews, which consist of setting clear questions related to the objective of the research. However, this data collection technique allows more flexibility to the researcher to ask further questions to the interviewee to elaborate on certain ideas and feelings (Dörnyei; Taylor et al.; Alamri). Convenience sampling was adopted in this study due to the researchers' existing network with potential interviewees, making it a time and cost-effective approach. This method is also well-suited for exploratory research, providing a foundation for more in-depth future studies.

Since the interviewees are international and were residing in different countries at the time of the data collection, the most convenient way to conduct the interviews was using internet-based platforms, which allow distance interviewing. Media platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom video calls enabled the recording of the interaction, which later facilitated the transcription and analysis of the data collected. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 international solo women travelers from 2 American and 4 European countries.

The interview guide incorporated nineteen main questions; each was supplemented by follow-up questions. The purpose of the probing was to give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that was desired, to deepen the responses to a question, and to increase the richness of the data being obtained.

The profile of the respondents was diversified. The majority of the respondents' age (75%) are between 20 and 30 years old, 15% are between 30 and 40 years old, and 10% are more than 40 years old. Most of the participants are from the United States of America (15 participants). Other countries like Belgium, France, Germany, Peru, and Russia are represented by one participant each.

Most of the respondents speak English either as their native or second/third language while others' native languages range from French, German, Spanish, to Russian. Eight of the participants have a good knowledge of three foreign languages: Arabic, Moroccan Arabic (Darija), and French; which form the official languages of Morocco. However, another official language which Morocco adopts, Amazigh, is not spoken by any participant.

Concerning the periods of time during which the respondents visited Morocco, 40% visited the country only once, 25% live permanently in the country after having visited it previously, 15% visited twice, 10% four times, 5% five times and another 5% between fifteen to twenty times. This shows that 60% of the participants have returned to Morocco after their first visit.

While respondents could visit Morocco in any month, the peak period for solo female travelers particularly those on study abroad programs or summer vacations occurred between May and August. Their trips spanned from 1989 to 2021, though most arrived after 2000, with a notable surge post-2010. This imbalance toward more recent years likely reflects the younger demographic of participants at the time of the study. It is also worth mentioning that most of the participants visited Morocco before 2019, and only a few did so from 2019 to 2021. This can be explained by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic which affected the number of tourists and travelers, not only in Morocco but also around the world.

Many of these women are students and have had the opportunity to participate in study abroad programs with their universities. While one of them had obtained a job opportunity after her previous visits and chose to live permanently in Morocco, others work and reside in their countries.

The respondents have visited different cities in Morocco. Some cities are more popular than others. Here is a summary of the visited cities by the interviewees:

Table 1
Percentage of the Visited Cities by the Interviewees

City Visited	Percentage
High Popularity (60-90%)	
Meknes	90%
Rabat	80%
Fes	75%
Marrakesh and Casablanca	60%
Moderate Popularity (55-30%)	
Tangier	55%
Essaouira	50%
Chefchaouen	40%
Asilah	35%
Ifrane	30%
Lower Popularity (25-15%)	
Agadir	25%
Tetouan	20%
Merzouga	15%
Minimal Popularity (10-5%)	
Ouarzazate, Azrou, El Jadida, Taghazout	10%
Moulay Idriss, Larache, M'diq, Tiflet, Khemisset, Volubilis, Oualidia, Mohammedia, Imsouane, Taliouine, Taroudant, Akchour, Todra, Bin El Ouidane, Ouzoud, Midelt, Beni-Mellal, Ben Slimane, El Hajeb, Ait Bougemez, Martil	5%

Data shows that the most visited cities are the imperial cities (Meknes, Fez, Rabat, Marrakesh) and summer destinations (Tangiers, Essaouira, Chefchaouen, Asilah). The convenient sampling of female students participating in study abroad programs may have affected these results. It is also observed that southern cities and small towns are less likely to be visited by international solo female travelers.

Results and Discussion

Following the objective of this study, which is to investigate international solo women's experiences before, during, and after traveling to Morocco, the results and discussion are going to be presented following this timeline.

Before Travel

Most of the participants had preconceived ideas about Morocco. Some of them mirror orientalist representations in colonial-male travel narratives (Said) and in the depiction of the Arab world in general and Morocco in particular by the American and European media (Shaheen). One participant said that "it was a popular tourist destination. Movies/TV portrayed it as an 'exotic' location (deserts, camels, etc.)" and two others said: "I thought it would be all desert;" "I assumed cities would be crowded with a lot of people living in close proximity." Placing herself in a superior tourist position, the solo international woman traveler expects to visit an exotic Morocco where deserts and camels are mundane. An ideology of otherness which is conceived through a spectacle of splendid landscapes, of swarming populations, and of dangerous encounters waiting to be explored by the "fanciful play" tourist profile (Simmons 2004).

The colonial perception (Mills, Hall, and Tucker) of these participants made them form an unchanging idea about Islam (being the official religion in Morocco) and about gender dynamics. They explained that they had thought Morocco would still be fixed in strict conservative Muslim culture and in a male-dominated society. Words like "conservative, communal, male-dominant, Islamic" were said by an interviewee, while another said "I assumed there would be no alcohol, some places had it and people drank more than I expected" and another "I expected it to be very similar to other Middle Eastern countries and to have very strict Muslim rules." This indicates that the image of Morocco abroad, particularly in Western countries, remains shaped by colonial encounters. This image is fixed, unchanging, and archaic. However, a small percentage of 25% went to Morocco with a neutral perception, waiting to understand the self and others: "I didn't really know much at all before I visited for the first time;" "I do not think I had preconceived ideas."

Other participants anticipated that Morocco was unsafe. Despite affirming that they expected a positive encounter with the culture, they had been worried about their security before traveling. Here are some comments by 30% of the interviewees: "Amazing geography and culture. Maybe not very safe;" "Not for a solo female;" "I thought it would be full of different cultural experiences and that I may have to worry about my safety a bit more than in the US." Others' perceptions were formed by their families, friends, and acquaintances, warning them against the physical and sexual danger they might face in Morocco. For example, "I was warned about street harassment;" "I didn't come in with too many pre-conceived notions as I wanted to keep an open mind and see what my experience offered. However, based on the reactions of friends and family, I can say that some American people may unfortunately view Morocco as an unsafe and underdeveloped country." This shows that even if a solo female traveler may have a positive expectation about the country, she still worries about her safety.

The participants (70%) contended that in order to enjoy the traveling experience to Morocco, they needed to plan their trip beforehand and take careful precautions to minimize risks and cultural misunderstandings. This proves that despite the perception of unsafety and the presence of several risks, women still decide to travel (Khan, Chelliah, and Ahmed). Some affirmed that they prepared plans on how to take means of transport, to visit possible cities and architectural sites, to enhance their safety at night, and to have travel insurance. Others preferred to collect as much information as possible from different sources about the country before traveling. These sources varied between books, travel guides, previous travelers, Moroccan friends, and online content as these comments show: "I read books about Morocco, by Moroccan authors, and by foreigners who had lived there;" "conversations with previous travelers, online blogs, reading books by Moroccan authors;" "I talked to other people who had traveled to the areas I was going or lived there. I asked the Moroccan friends I knew what it was like to live there.

Talked to a lot of other biracial/bi-religious couples about challenges they faced;" "I researched and read about the country online, aiming to learn more about its history and culture. I chatted with some people who had previously visited to ask questions about their experiences;" "classes, making Maghrebi friends, reading about the culture, and other American experiences."

Before the democratization of online travel content, information sources, whether textual, visual, or oral and whether paper-based, digital, or testimonial, have been widely based on a history of colonial and post-colonial trajectories (Said, Shaheen, Hall, and Tucker). A traveler is not allowed to exist outside of it; she is "always already" (Althusser) conditioned by this heritage. However, the presence of online travel blogs and videos about women's travel, online communication among international users, and cross-cultural educational programs has contributed to correcting a previous understanding and creating a different one. In fact, some travelers affirmed that, before traveling to Morocco, they had chosen to learn basic Arabic and/or Moroccan dialect, in addition to speaking or learning French. They explained that this decision was motivated by the desire to make their trip easier, to be able to connect better with locals, and to fully immerse themselves in the culture. This confirms Stone and Petrick's idea that travel improves knowledge, skills, and adaptability. It also confirms the fact that some solo women travelers perceive their travels as an equal cultural encounter where they seek to interact and socialize with the local culture (Simmons, Mills, Fullagar).

When asked about the motivations to visit Morocco, some (15%) expressed an interest in the culture, others (10%) mentioned visiting family and friends they had met online (Ng and Ho, Hamid et.al., Pereira and Silva, Seow and Brown), and another category (20%) moved to Morocco for a work/volunteering experience. However, the majority of the interviewees' motivations (45%) were educational, such as study abroad programs, and academic and research purposes (Bond, Chiang, Jogaratnam, Pereira, and Silva). Consequently, international solo women's travel to Morocco is characterized by diverse reasons that are likely to enrich their personal, academic, and professional experiences.

During Travel

During their short or long-term stay in Morocco, the participants have experienced ambivalent situations and conflicting emotions about different components related to transportation, tour guides, and local people. The advantages and disadvantages of these experiences have all left a lasting impression on international solo female travelers.

The means of transportation was an important subject for the interviewees as they had many comments about it. All the travelers agreed that comfort and safety are of great importance to them while taking transportation. According to them, these could be ensured by choosing specific types of transport: trains and coach buses for inter-city shifts and small taxis[1] for short trips inside a city. These three choices are supported by the vacancy, suitable indoor temperature, especially during summer days, affordability, and easy access to information on the internet for intercity transport. Positive comments such as "in terms of the train, I felt they were easy to navigate and I personally felt comfortable. As for taxis, they were easy to use and talking to taxi drivers was always a fun experience;" "I traveled with a personal taxi back to Casa. It was also a lovely experience as the driver was extremely friendly and I learnt more about Morocco;" "fantastic. Made friends with a lot of cool taxi drivers," highlighted not only the ease in navigation but also the pleasant conversations with taxi drivers. Thus, the means of transport are an essential component to international solo women's travelers as they seek comfort, a pleasant encounter with locals during the trip, and ease of navigation.

However, other women experienced some ambivalent transport situations. Despite their positive impression, they had uncomfortable feelings such as stress, fear, frustration, and confusion. Stress and fear were expressed by two participants: "Mainly positive experience,

though intercity buses have sometimes been stressful with the crowds and occasional theft;" "I preferred the petit taxi over the grand taxis. Grand taxis were a little more stressful in the areas I would go. The bus was easy to navigate but really stressful to be on, alone as a woman, especially at night. I always had earphones in without music playing and would get a spot by the window so I didn't have to make eye contact with anyone." These testimonies reflect that some means of transport, like buses and grand taxis, are not safe public spaces for women travelers, which questions the strategy of inclusion and sustainability by the Ministry of Transport and Logistics. Feelings of frustration were expressed by a participant saying that it was "sometimes challenging, people were sometimes helpful, sometimes people asked too many questions." One interviewee was stunned at her experience with grand taxis: "I never had a problem getting from point A to point B. It was surprising to have four people in back seat of a taxi and two in passenger seat. Things always ran a bit late, but we always got there" and another one related her challenge with communication by saying "the language barrier is something a bit difficult." As previously mentioned, the difficulty of communicating with public transport drivers and service providers interrogates the Ministry of Transport and Logistics' efforts to develop the quality of the service. In addition, the uncomfortable feelings, which the international solo women travelers described, convey a status of vulnerability and prove an unfixed cultural adaptation since the solo female traveler negotiates her presence in this public space, which confirms the findings by Fullagar.

The tourist guides were quite troublesome for most participants who had chosen to resort to their services. Most experiences showed unprofessional, unsafe, and profit-driven guides. One participant said "I don't really use them, have used one in Fes and he had to leave the tour suddenly so I just walked around alone… but if I used a tour guide I would want a woman!"[2] The interviewed women pinpointed to the fact that some guides did not highlight positive aspects of the Moroccan culture and were reproducing colonial discourses such as this woman who said that "they give a very 'white washed/tourist' view of things. I've never read or seen any tourist guide that really grasped the true experience of Morocco." Few others added that the material benefit is what drives these kinds of guides: "As I live here, I haven't had too many interactions with tourist guides, but my experiences with them have been mixed. Some seem genuinely eager to show and teach visitors about Morocco, whereas others can be pushy and seem to just want money;" "competent mostly, some trying to lure us into tourist traps;" "they often have deals with various vendors which makes sense and I respect it as a business model - many people come here to buy and I understand they would be useful for those unable to easily communicate with shop owners."

Other experiences were positive due to the minute selection of the tour guides by the academic host institutions in the case of study abroad programs: "All the tour guides I interacted with were through the study abroad program so they were all very nice and tolerable;" "they were extremely helpful, accessible, ready to answer questions and proud about their country." These ambivalent testimonies show that the profession of tour guiding in Morocco reflects unprofessionalism and a lack of rigor, which explains the measures recently taken by the Ministry of Tourism to regulate this field by discouraging unauthorized tour guides and training the authorized ones.

On another level, a few participants preferred not to follow a constructed common touristy experience and rather explored their surroundings on their own, such as this participant saying, "I don't personally like tour guides - the experience feels too constructed for my taste." The motivation behind this attitude is to enrich the solo female traveler's cultural experience and to make herself feel empowered and self-confident through an independent exploration of her surroundings which reinforces experiential learning and confirms many research studies on the

subject (Ng and Ho, Stone and Petrick, Umur, Silva et.al., Simmons, Chiang and Jogaratnam, Pereira and Silva). It is, however, questionable whether these self-reliant tours enable the traveler to deeply explore the history of each visited space.

Another aspect discussed during the interviews is the attitude of local people towards the international solo woman traveler. The majority described friendly, welcoming, and helpful attitudes from locals like these participants saying: "People came to me easily and chatted, and some offered to show me some places;" "I received more attention, as someone who is visibly foreign. Most people have been polite and friendly'" "they were so welcoming and warm. Always willing to help and accommodate." Some enjoyed benefits from their looks like this participant: "They always thought I was Moroccan. So, I got treated like a Moroccan woman all the time, which definitely had its benefits" while another received positive feedback when she spoke the Moroccan dialect, as she said, "they were usually excited that I was learning Arabic." However, the notion of personal space and intimacy was problematic for one solo international female traveler. She was unable to assimilate to the invasion of her personal space, as she explains, "some locals were sometimes a bit pushy and getting too close."

When asked if they had experienced any threatening situations, 75% responded that they had. These dangerous situations, as described by the travelers, were all related to physical and sexual violence in the public space. Here are some testimonials:

- "There was some harassment from younger and older gentlemen that was frustrating."
- "A few weeks after I first arrived in Morocco, I was mugged at knifepoint in broad daylight by a park with two other friends. Not long after, I was wrapped in a car by a Moroccan guy who I had known for a good amount of time and thought was just my friend. Almost daily cat calling that got more physical and aggressive during the winter months."
- "One man tried to pull my roommate and I into his car, offering to give us dirhams. Another time, a man grabbed me in the street. Men often followed me for long periods of time, and I would have to find creative ways to escape the situation."

Most of the encounters were incidents of sexual harassment, assault, and theft. Ranging from catcalling, following the victim in the street, to sexual and physical assaults, the offenders are young or old men and complete strangers to the victims. It is clear that the presence of solo international female travelers is seen as an exotic/erotic individual, hence an intrusion into the Moroccan conservative public space. These travelers suffered from similar treatment which Moroccan women undergo in the public space (High Commission for Planning), as both international and national women are already conditioned by their gender discriminated profile of being a woman present in the public space and unaccompanied by a male chaperone.

In order to elude these violent encounters, a traveler changed her behavior by covering up her body like this participant: "In my solo trip to Rabat, while waiting to meet up with a friend, I had two men follow me on two separate occasions. One of them had tried to grab my arm for attention. It was the only time I felt fearful that something might happen to me. I was wearing a past knee length dress and I walked inside a clothing store and bought some pants and a blouse to change." On other occasions, all that was possible as a solution was to escape the threatening situation either by taking a public transport or by fleeing the scene as these women confirm:

- "I was walking home late with my roommate and a man started harassing us and would not leave us alone. We had to take a taxi home instead."
- "A man tried to follow me home and drug me. He followed me down the street in his car and parked, then got out in front of me when I was walking home alone. He had a rag in his hand with some kind of liquid on it. Thankfully, I was almost home so I ran into my building where my concierge was."

• "I was robbed once and another time, men were trying to follow me home. Another time I was swarmed by a group of young boys. In all these situations, I was able to go to the nearest shop owner and wait until I felt safe."

One participant mentioned that during the sexual harassment she was facing, a local bystander intervened to protect her: "Late night in Meknes, I was walking home and a man grabbed me and pushed me up against a wall. The older man who cleaned the street witnessed it and started hitting the man with his broom, which rescued me from the situation."

All these experiences with lack of safety, undergone by the international solo female travelers, confirm previous studies achieved in European and Asian countries (Bianchi, Su and Wu, Yang). Surveillance was applied on these women through the male gaze and violence, which led, in almost all occasions, to the inability to use the resistance techniques explained by Jordan, Gibson, and Stephens. In fact, the victims had to deal with the feelings of fear and finding an escape, and had little chance to think otherwise. However, these hazardous encounters did not stop the respondents from re-appropriating their presence as travelers in the Moroccan public space. This shows a defiant attitude towards such violence, unlike Stephens, who chose not to visit Morocco again. In fact, when asked if they think that Morocco is still a safe country for international solo female travelers, 90% said yes.

This resistant position by international solo women travelers shows that they have strengthened their self-confidence and adaptability skills (Stone and Petrick 151). When asked about other types of challenges faced, the participants explained that the nature of solo travel teaches patience, planning, and responsibility. One participant described the difficulty in finding her way in the old town, "labyrinths of downtown medinas, but it was a nice challenge to go through it!" And another one explained that "you're in this constant state of being over alert. You have to overanalyze even simple situations and scenarios. Even just deciding to walk to a hanout [small convenience store] becomes a task."

International solo women travelers' experiences during their stay in Morocco were characterized by positive, negative, and ambivalent encounters. These experiences confirm the difference between a traveler as opposed to a tourist, as explained by Simmons. In fact, all these women engaged their senses, were involved in authentic relations with the locals, and went through self-discovery and experimentation (Stone and Petrick 151). This also invalidates Mills' analysis of female travel literature produced in the 19th and 20th centuries, which placed the female traveler as superior to the culture visited.

After Travel

When the participants were asked about their post-travel impressions, they expressed their genuine admiration for the different components which make up contemporary Morocco. Here are some testimonials:

• "I am absolutely in love with Morocco. The culture has so much to offer, every place is so diverse and different. The food, the music, the language everything is so stimulating."

• "I have loved living here and getting to know the people, culture, and languages of the country. Overall, people have been incredibly welcoming and have made me feel at home. I appreciate the generosity and kindness I've received and the collectivist nature of the society as a whole."

• "Architecture, orange trees bloom and the smell of it, hard-working woodcrafters and mosaics makers, wonderful artists decorating the porcelain, great vegetables and flavorful fruits, cheap and tasty fresh orange juice, everything!"

• "The people are phenomenal, the food is fantastic, and the landscape is beautiful. I was amazed from the start."

However, they mentioned that the only matter which needs careful attention and serious measures was related to their safety from physical and sexual violence. One participant pointed out that solo travel becomes an arduous experience because she needs to be alert at all times and wary of harassment. She considered that it would be safer to travel as part of a group or be accompanied by a male relative or friend. Another comment was a call for a reaction by the witnesses of gender-based violence in the public space. Another one reinforced that solo women travelers must be "smart, plan ahead, and acknowledge the risks" when visiting Morocco. Consequently, Morocco has tremendous potential to attract international solo women travelers thanks to its diverse culture, welcoming local people, a developing transport infrastructure, and improving tourist services. However, one component tarnishes this idealistic experience, which is the lack of safety these women experience when they visit the country.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Before traveling to Morocco, international solo women travelers had adopted the white male colonialist/orientalist ideologies. They were interpellated by Western discourses of the East, which are male-dominated. Despite the interconnected world facilitated by the internet, the majority of travelers did not have a "realistic" idea of Morocco. Thus, promotional campaigns are needed to present a contemporary image of the country's diversity, including the natural landscape and updated cultural trends in order to avoid exoticizing the image of Morocco.

The tourist profile soon disappears once international solo women travelers set foot in Morocco. These travelers were humbled by the experience, were open to learn about the culture and its people, and questioned their pre-travel beliefs about the country. Empowerment during solo travel should, therefore, not only be understood in terms of female autonomy and conquering one's fears and challenges during travel, but also in destabilizing and overthrowing Western male-dominated and orientalist visions of the Other.

In fact, solo international women travelers are primarily interested in educational and cultural experiences. During her journey, the traveler seeks to gain genuine insight into the host culture, develop an understanding of cultural differences, overcome prior stereotypes, and reflect on her learning experience. This ongoing effort is challenging not only due to cultural differences but also because of the varying quality of tourist services.

Despite a general positive feedback regarding the means of transport, participants reported two main challenges: difficulty in communication and concerns about safety. In light of its 2023-2026 strategy, it is highly recommended that the Ministry of Transport and Logistics train drivers and all service providers in foreign languages, particularly English, to facilitate better communication with international travelers. More importantly, the ministry should prioritize ensuring safety on all forms of public transport, including the installation of surveillance cameras on board, strict and precise policy measures, awareness campaigns among passengers, staff training, and security presence.

Tour guiding is another tourism related service which was criticized by international solo women travelers. Some representatives of the profession are accused of being unprofessional, spreading false information about Morocco, involving travelers in tourist scams, and engaging in sexual harassment. It is advisable that illegal tour guides be identified by the ministry in charge of the sector and penalized in accordance with the law. Moreover, authorized tour guides should undergo regular training and capacity-building programs to update their communication approach in line with modern-day Morocco and improve their competence to engage with diverse groups, especially international solo female travelers. Finally, the profession needs to

raise awareness about behaviors which constitute harassment and violence against women. It should also aim to include more female tour guides which could, on the one hand, increase women's visibility in public spaces, and on the other hand, offer more options and help female travelers feel safer.

An additional recommendation for both the tourism and transport sectors is to enable access to the identification details of authorized and licensed drivers, tour guides, and service providers through mobile applications. Simultaneously, mobile apps should also include features for reporting incidents, ensuring that international solo women travelers can easily access both forms of information. This could be further supported by the establishment of information desks or the placement of signage in public spaces, particularly in high-traffic tourist areas, to ensure travelers are well-informed.

The women interviewed in this study shared their experiences with local people, which were largely positive. However, the issue of safety surfaced repeatedly in their narratives, with many reporting incidents of sexual harassment and physical assault by strangers in public spaces. It is recommended that the Ministry of Interior collaborate with the Ministry of Tourism to establish a tourist police force in popular tourist areas to address incidents of theft and violence against international solo women travelers. Additionally, establishing an emergency hotline could provide immediate assistance to these women facing threatening situations.

Consequently, the Ministry of Transport and Logistics, the Ministry of Tourism, and the Ministry of Interior must integrate safety measures for international solo women travelers into their strategic frameworks. Addressing gender-based violence in public services and spaces not only contributes to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 10 on reducing inequalities, but also enhances Morocco's appeal as a destination for international solo female travelers, making their journeys easier and safer. In this regard, the ministries' approaches should go beyond purely economic objectives and adopt a deep social perspective, recognizing that safety and women's inclusivity are essential to sustainable tourism and long-term economic development.

Notes

1. In Morocco, there are two types of taxis: Petit (small) taxi and grand (big) taxi. The petit taxi takes up to 3 people only, uses a taximeter, and is usually more expensive than the grand taxi, which takes up to 6 passengers with a fixed price and a fixed arrival destination point. Small taxis used to be more comfortable than the big ones, as these latter were old car models. During the last decade, however, the Moroccan ministry has enabled many grand taxi owners to change their cars into more comfortable and new engines.

2. Female tour guides represent a minority in Morocco. There is a striking lack of statistical studies on this segment of the workforce. The Ministry of Tourism's (2023) list of authorized tour guides does not specify the gender of the individuals listed. In the absence of credible surveys, AI-based tools (Perplexity, Copilot, and ChatGPT) were employed to estimate the percentage of women tour guides using this list. Results indicate that out of 4670 tour guides, only 2% are women. While the AI engines may have limitations in identifying gender from ambiguous names, this result provides insight into the sector's low feminization rate.

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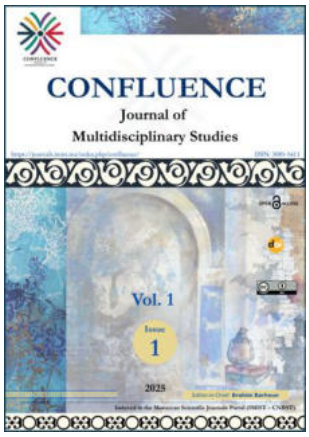
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The Interplay of Linguistic and Cultural Factors in Translating Theatrical Concepts: A Comparative Analysis of Translation Theories and Practices

Abdelmajid El Sayd
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Department of English, Tetouan

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Abdelmajid El Sayd is a Professor at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Tetouan, where he has served since 2021. His research interests include translation studies, cultural studies, literature, and the arts, with a particular focus on the relationship between language, culture, and performance. His work examines how translation serves as a medium of cultural exchange, particularly within Arabic and global contexts.

a.elsayd@uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9021-6397

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Abdelmajid El Sayd
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Department of English, Tetouan

ABSTRACT

This article examines the translation of English theatrical concepts into Arabic through a comparative analysis of Moroccan scholars Hassan Mniai and Khalid Amine. Using key terms—tragedy, comedy, performance, and site-specific performance—as focal points, the paper evaluates each translator's strategies against major linguistic and cultural translation theories, including those of Catford, Nida, Newmark, Bassnett, and Lefevere. The study highlights the challenges of (non)equivalence and emphasizes the role of translators as cultural mediators. By assessing divergent translational choices, it argues for the development of culturally rooted and theoretically informed practices in Arabic theatre translation. The paper contributes to the understudied field of Arab theatre translation by proposing more standardized, context-sensitive approaches.

KEYWORDS

Translation

Theatre

Theatrical Concepts

Equivalence

Arabic Terminology

Introduction

The translation of theatrical terminology from English into Arabic constitutes a specialized and intellectually challenging field of investigation, bridging the disciplines of language, culture, and performance. While translation, in its broadest sense, has long been employed as a mechanism for intellectual development and cross-cultural communication, the translation of theatre discourse is framed by specific challenges. This is due to the intricate interfacing of linguistic constructions, conceptual meaning, values, and performance traditions. Unlike technical translation or literary translation, the translation of theatre terminology into Arabic involves not only the replacement of words but also the communication of culturally situated ideas infused with specific theatre practices. As such, the translation transgresses the lexical and grammatical confines of language to enter the terrain of ideology, aesthetics, and reception.

Despite the development of translation studies as a scholarly discipline from the latter part of the twentieth century, the particular area of theatre translation, particularly the translation of theatre terminology, has not received a proportionate scholarly focus in the Arab world. Research in the field has been lacking, particularly in theatre scholarship written in Arabic, where terminology has been inconsistent, contextually misplaced, or diluted in meaning. This is exacerbated by the failure to coordinate among Arab language institutions, the unavailability of searchable dictionaries of theatre and performance, and the prevalence of literalist translation approaches that lack conceptual and performative fidelity to the source terminology. This poses

Contact ✉ a.elsayd@uae.ac.ma
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challenges for translators to select suitable Arabic equivalents for English theatre concepts, leading to misinterpretation, ambiguity, and meaning loss.

This research addresses the above concerns by conducting a comparative study of four selected English theatre concepts and their translation into Arabic, with a focus on two eminent Moroccan translators in the discipline, Hassan Mniai and Khalid Amine. Concepts considered include theatre, tragedy, comedy, performance, and site-specific performance. These were selected due to the frequency of their deployment within scholarship, the complexity of the theory, and the specificity of the culture. Through a comparison of Mniai's and Amine's methods, this research examines how each translator navigates the space between the source language and target language, as well as the source culture and target culture. This comparison offers insight into the general implications of translation decisions within the context of Arabic theatre.

The guiding research questions informing the current paper are threefold: Firstly, how does Mniai engage with and translate the chosen theatrical concepts throughout his critical and translation work? Second, what strategies and term-forming processes do Mniai and Amine adopt in translating these ideas from English into Arabic, and what terminology is formed from English words and expressions in the target language? Finally, to what extent is it possible to transplant theatrical ideas that are resistant to direct translation into Arabic in a manner that maintains both semantic richness and performative intentionality? These queries are examined using theoretical frameworks that combine both linguistically based and culturally based approaches to translation, enabling holistic reasoning about translation as both a linguistic and a cultural process.

The research is founded on the premise that the translation of theatre theory presents multifaceted difficulties that exceed the reach of linguistic equivalence. This is due to the layered nature of theatre terminology, which is habitually drawn from particular historical, aesthetic, and cultural traditions. In addition, the research assumes that translators will interpret and represent the same concept differently, depending on their level of familiarity with the source culture, their proficiency with the performative meaning of the term, and the translation paradigm they adopt. This is best illustrated in the different renderings of the notion of "suspense," where Mniai renders the word as *al-mumāṭala* المماطلة (procrastination). In contrast, Amine employs *tashwīq* تشويق (anticipation or tension) as an indicator of different interpretive lenses and theoretical orientations.

The goal of this paper is to identify and critically examine the terminological, conceptual, and cultural aspects involved in translating theatrical concepts from English to Arabic. It aims to highlight the importance of adopting a theoretically informed and culturally aware approach to translation. Through its study of translation as a hermeneutic, communicative, and performative action, the study underscores the necessity for translators to serve as both transcultural brokers and not just linguistic technicians. As transcultural brokers, translators must possess a profound understanding of both the theatrical traditions at play and the evolution of terminology, as well as the processes governing conceptual equivalence and cultural transfer.

This paper also aims to highlight the greater importance of the problem within Arabic studies of translation and theatre critique. As the Arab world becomes increasingly involved in international performance practice and theory, the translation of theatre ideas is a crucial prerequisite for creating an indigenous theatre lexicon that is both appropriate and relevant. A strong, standardized glossary not only enhances the study of Arabic theatre but also allows for effective intercultural communication and scholarly exchange. By elucidating the translation strategies of two eminent Moroccan scholars, this research contributes to the formulation of more consistent and thoughtful practices within the profession of translating theatre in Arabic.

By doing so, the research demands greater scholarly focus on theatre translation, specifically the translation of theatre terminology, and calls for the development of cooperative frameworks among Arab language academies, translators, and theatre professionals. It is only through collaborative and context-oriented initiatives like this that we can ensure the faithful transmission of performance ideas and concepts across cultures and languages, safeguarding the integrity of the original work while facilitating the development of Arab theatre discourse.

Review of Literature

The translation of theatre concepts from English to Arabic requires both linguistic and theoretical work on cultural aspects. This research employs influential paradigms from translation studies to examine how various selected theatre terms—namely, tragedy, comedy, performance, and site-specific performance—are translated and interpreted by Hassan Mniai and Khalid Amine. These terms are not merely linguistic entities, nor are they purely culture-free ones. Instead, they are culturally located, historically contingent, and inscribed in performative traditions and disciplinary fields. Therefore, interpreting and conveying them requires something beyond lexical substitution, i.e., conceptual recontextualization across linguistic and discursive boundaries. To study this process, the current work employs both linguistically inclined approaches and culture- and literature-oriented models.

Linguistically oriented translation theories are primarily concerned with the relationship between the source and target languages, with a specific focus on the form, meaning, and equivalence of words. Roman Jakobson is one of the earliest scholars to outline the rudiments of translation theory. In his widely quoted "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," Jakobson differentiates among three kinds of translation: intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic (233). This research is primarily concerned with interlingual translation, as characterized by Jakobson as "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language" (233). Significantly, Jakobson emphasizes the problem of equivalence, claiming that total equivalence between two linguistic signs is impossible, especially when culture and conceptual meaning are involved. This is especially apt to the translation of theatre terminology, where even ostensibly universal events like tragedy and performance have different theatrical traditions.

J. C. Catford further develops the discipline by positing the existence of translation shifts, where translation diverges from formal correspondence to achieve textual equivalence. In A Linguistic Theory of Translation, he defines translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language" (Catford 20). Catford makes a distinction between formal correspondence, which is grammatical in focus, and textual equivalence, which is focused on the communicative function of the text. Whereas Catford's emphasis is still primarily structural, his level and category shifts help analyze situations where the Arabic translations of theatrical concepts differ in class or meaning from their English counterparts. Nonetheless, his model is incomplete in explaining culture and aesthetic subtleties, which are unavoidable in the translation of theatre discourse.

Eugene Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence allows for a more functional approach to addressing meaning in translation. In contrast to formal equivalence, which aims to match form and content as closely as possible, dynamic equivalence prioritizes the message's impact on the target culture. According to Nida and Taber, the translation should strive for "the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message, first in meaning and second in style" (12). This is especially helpful in play translation, where the translator must consider the performative effect of an expression. A word-for-word imitation of the original may not elicit the desired emotional

or intellectual impact on an Arab audience. For instance, the translation of performance as ʿ*arḍ* عرض literally might overlook the richer semiotic and experiential sense in which the term functions within Western theatrical language.

Peter Newmark proposes a middle-ground position between formalist and functionalist approaches. He differentiates between semantic translation, which prioritizes adherence to the original text, and communicative translation, which aims to evoke an equal reaction in the target readership (Newmark 39). Newmark's model promotes balancing linguistic accuracy with effective communication—a crucial consideration in translating culturally rich phrases, such as site-specific performance. Newmark's acknowledgment of the expectations of the readership and context enables a richer understanding of the decisions made in translation, where literal translation might obscure the performative nature of the original term.

Where linguistically oriented approaches to translation provide valuable tools for measuring text fidelity and equivalence, they fall short in addressing the broader sociocultural aspects of theatre translation. It is for this reason, then, that this research also engages with culture-and-literature-oriented approaches to translation, which situate translation within ideological, historical, and cultural parameters. Such approaches are particularly relevant to the translation of words like "tragedy" and "comedy," which both have lexical, culturally, and philosophically laden connotations stemming from centuries of dramatic theory and practice.

André Lefevere's idea of translation as rewriting offers a critical tool for discussing how translational decisions reflect broader ideological and cultural frameworks. For him, "all translation is a form of rewriting, and all rewriting is manipulation" (Lefevere vii). Translators are guided by particular ideological, poetic, and cultural principles that influence their decisions, whether consciously or unconsciously. For tragedy, for example, the term is not just a genre of drama but a philosophical term deriving from Western classical culture. Translators writing in Arabic settings might try to refunction or resemantize the term to fit into local frameworks of aesthetics and philosophy. Lefevere's model explains such changes as motivated actions instead of neutral transfers.

Susan Bassnett supplements Lefevere's view with her emphasis on the significance of cultural systems in translation. According to Translation Studies, meaning is not solely contained within linguistic signs but is conditioned by "interlocking systems of language, culture, and literature" (Bassnett 14). This is especially helpful in discussing the translation of site-specific performance, which is linked to Western avant-garde and postmodern performance practices. Inasmuch as Bassnett's method enables us to perceive translation as one of the processes of cultural negotiation through which terms are not merely shifted from one linguistic system to another but recontextualized within different artistic and cultural discourses.

Hatim and Mason add another useful model by merging discourse study and translation study. They define translation as "an act of communication which tries to convey, across language and culture barriers, another act of communication" (Hatim and Mason 1). Their model emphasizes discourse organization, ideological alignment, and readership, all of which are critical factors in theatre translation. Comedy translation, for example, requires far more than simply transferring a genre term; one must also grasp the culture's codes, narratives, and readership expectations that determine what counts as "comic" within a particular culture.

Recent scholarship has expanded and nuanced these foundational theories, particularly within Arabic-language translation and theatre studies. Mohamed Iffat's recent analysis of translating Macbeth into literary Arabic verse highlights the translator's dual responsibility: maintaining the poetic and tragic resonance of the original while reconfiguring its dramaturgical cadence to align with Arabic literary tradition (93). His work exemplifies how classical genre forms, such as tragedy, can be reshaped through translational aesthetics, enabling cross-cultural performance without erasing contextual depth.

Building on the idea of formal and conceptual coherence, Ahmed Nasser et al. advocate for terminological precision through the use of automated translation tools tailored for Arabic (Nasser et al.). While their study is situated in computational linguistics, its implications for theatrical discourse are far-reaching: without a stable glossary, performance translators risk conceptual fragmentation. Standardized terminologies, they argue, not only ensure fidelity across translations but also help unify academic and artistic discourse in Arabic-speaking contexts.

Similarly, Bassem Al-Rashidi's study on the dialectal rendering of Hamlet in Aden sheds light on vernacular translation as an act of cultural localization. He argues that dialectal adaptation not only facilitates audience identification but also injects new political and emotional valences into canonical texts (61). This process mirrors Nida's principle of dynamic equivalence, where the impact of the translation on the audience is prioritized over strict textual correspondence (Nida and Taber 12).

Nour Jaber's work on Ibsen in Arabic theatre further supports this dynamic model. She observes that translators often strategically recalibrate dramaturgical concepts to resonate with Arab narrative structures and ideological contexts (77). This blending of Western theatrical forms with local aesthetic expectations demonstrates the translator's role not just as a linguistic technician but as a dramaturgical architect and cultural interlocutor.

In the context of experimental theatre, El Amrani and Salmi examine the complexities of translating the concept of "site-specific performance" into Arabic. Their findings suggest that without an understanding of Western spatial dramaturgy and performance theory, literal translations of such terms can strip them of their theoretical richness (36). They advocate for translation as a form of cultural negotiation, echoing Bassnett's framework of meaning construction through interlocking systems of language, culture, and literature (Bassnett 14).

Finally, Khalil and Said's research on subtitled comedy reveals the difficulty of translating culturally dependent humor. Though centered on film and television, their emphasis on the translator's strategic negotiation between foreignness and domestic readability is directly applicable to comedic genre terms in theatre. They argue that humor translation hinges on sociocultural cues and narrative conventions that demand more than lexical substitution (44).

Together, these theoretical approaches to translation form a rich overall model for the study of translating theatre concepts. Linguistic theories provide specificity in the evaluation of text and semantic equivalence, while culture theory broadens the spectrum to encompass ideology, audience reception, and context of performance. By applying this integrated model to compare the translation of tragedy, comedy, performance, and site-specific performance, this research aims to demonstrate how both linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge are essential to effective translation within theatre. It is only with both of these kinds of awareness that the translator can act as an authentic mediator of performative cultures, making the translated words accessible to the target community while maintaining the conceptual coherence of the source.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative comparative approach to examine how theatre concepts are translated from English into Arabic, with a particular focus on the strategies of Hassan Mniai and Khalid Amine. At its core is the investigation of how four culturally and semantically dense concepts—tragedy, comedy, performance, and site-specific performance—are translated into Arabic by two eminent Moroccan scholars. This enables a critical analysis of each figure's

translational decisions, facilitating a broader discussion of the linguistic and cultural aspects of theatre translation.

The reason for choosing these four is rooted in the fact that they are central to dramatic theory, occur with frequency in critical and theoretical writing, and are conceptually rich. Each one represents not merely one genre or performative type but a rich cluster of cultural, historical, and aesthetic connotations. The choice is also reflective of the deliberations within Arabic theatre studies concerning the difficulty of defining and localizing such terminology in language accessible to both source and target cultures.

To conduct this investigation, the study aims to compare specific Arabic translations presented by Mniai and Amine in their respective critical works and scholarly writings. Using the integrated theoretical model sketched above, which draws from linguistic approaches—Jakobson's, Catford's, Nida's, and Newmark's—along with culturally oriented approaches given by Lefevere, Bassnett, Hatim, and Mason, we are in the position to analyze both micro-textual and macro-contextual levels, looking at not just how a word is translated but why it is translated in a particular manner.

The study is keen to examine the processes of term-making and the question of (non)equivalence. It specifically explores how translators bridge lexical and semantic gaps between English and Arabic and negotiate the cultural specificity of performance concepts. Places where translators utilize strategies such as Arabicization, adaptation, or transplantation are identified and evaluated. For instance, in translating performance, the study considers whether the selected term in Arabic captures the term's experiential and semiotic aspects or merely its superficial meaning. In the same vein, the translation of site-specific performance is analyzed in relation to its situatedness within current Western avant-garde practice, which might not have its direct equivalent within Arabic theatrical practice.

The research is also cognizant of the translator as a mediator across cultures. In contrast to viewing translation as essentially technical, it is attentive to the translator's ideological stance, scholarship, and acquaintance with Western and Arabic dramatic traditions. All of these inevitably affect the translator's interpretive choices and his level of fidelity or domestication to the text. This is very much the situation for Hassan Mniai, whose translations tend to have a literal or etymological bent, as opposed to the culturally and semiologically aware renderings of Amine.

Lastly, the methodology is supported by conceptual analysis, close reading, and comparison of the texts. Translations are not merely analyzed in relation to each other but within the context of the theoretical stance of the authors and the texts they have written. Where appropriate, the meanings of the English words are elucidated through reference to standard dictionaries of theatre terminology, and their Arab equivalents are analyzed for semantic accuracy, conceptual coherence, and cultural salience. This methodological approach underpins the following analysis, in which each term is scrutinized in depth, and the implications of its translation on the construction of a unified, culture-based Arabic theatrical terminology are assessed.

Comparative Analysis of Key Theatrical Concepts

This section presents a more nuanced comparative study of four theatrical concepts—tragedy, comedy, performance, and site-specific performance—and their translation into Arabic by Hassan Mniai and Khalid Amine. The examination (based on the theory above) focuses on the cultural, linguistic, and conceptual effects of each translation. The objective is not so much a comparison of lexical choices as an evaluation of the wider hermeneutic and performative strategies employed by the respective translators.

Tragedy

The word tragedy is equivalent to the English word trajections, meaning a form of drama literature that represents human suffering and invokes in the audience an accompanying catharsis. In Western drama, the notion of tragedy is often associated with Aristotelian doctrine, as presented in Poetics, where tragedy is conceived as the mimicry of a serious action that "produces pity and fear" (Aristotle 10). The concept encompasses both structural and affective aspects, therefore.

Hassan Mniai translates tragedy into Arabic as *maʾsāt* مأساة, meaning "any sad or unfortunate event," a term frequently used in Arabic literature. Though مأساة may be an appropriate translation overall, it does not possess the philosophical particularity or dramaturgical specificity of the original word. Mniai's interpretation leans towards literal translation, indicative of an inclination to emphasize the etymological match more than the conceptual match. His translation is more a category for storytelling than the codified dramatic shape that is grounded in a specific aesthetic or historical tradition.

Khalid Amine, however, suggests the translation of tragedy from a hermeneutic standpoint that takes into account not only the performative nature of the term but also its philosophical meaning. Amine not only employs the word *tārājīdiyā* تراجيديا but also provides a gloss in the footnotes, situating it within its context to trace its roots back to the classical and forward to the contemporary. He insists that the tragic is an architected genre with specific historical laws of composition and affective formation. This course of action is in line with Lefevere's claim that translation is a rewriting conditioned by poetics and ideology (Lefevere vii). By situating tragedy within its broader cultural context, Amine enhances the term's more performative accuracy.

The contrast between the two translations demonstrates how a concept that might appear on the surface to form an understood or stable background in the case of tragedy can permit competing views, depending on the translating framework. Mniai's reconstruction expresses a textual or narrative orientation, while Amine's rendition confronts the historical use of the term in dramatic theory. This disparity sheds light on the necessity of more critical and terminologically precise framing for translating between Arabic and theatre.

Comedy

The concept of comedy in Western tradition is equally complex. Originating from the Greek kōmōidia, it historically referred to dramatic works with humorous or satirical elements, typically featuring a happy ending. In literary theory, comedy serves as both a genre and a mechanism for social critique, often using laughter as a tool for exposing hypocrisy, power structures, or absurdities.

Mniai translates comedy as *kūmīdiyā* كوميديا, a transliteration of the English term that reflects an attempt to preserve the foreignness of the word. While this choice signals respect for the term's specificity, it may not resonate fully with Arabic-speaking audiences unfamiliar with the classical roots of the genre. Mniai's translation thus runs the risk of opacity, offering little in terms of explanation or adaptation for the target culture. His reliance on transliteration can be understood as a strategy of transplantation—bringing the term wholesale into Arabic with minimal modification.

Amine, on the other hand, takes the word *al-mulahāt* الملهاة, which is an Arabic word from the literary tradition. However, he does not take that charge uncritically; he situates it in both modernity and the classical alike. Comedy in Amine's work is not just for enjoyment; it is a mode of discourse that moves between laughter and social analysis. His translation follows the

communicative translation model (Newmark 39), which aims to convey both the conceptual and emotional meanings of the word to the Arabic addressee.

كوميديا might be linguistically faithful, but we would argue that الملهاة is richer in meaning. It marks a regional appreciation of comedic forms. It acknowledges the performance and the much older, as well as far more geological, heritage of Arabic and Islamic modes of tale-telling, such as *al maqamat* and *al hakawati*. The contrast once more highlights competing translational ideologies at work: one in the direction of formal equivalence, the other in the direction of cultural accommodation.

Performance

Of the four notions examined in this paper, performance is probably the most semantically plastic and culturally debated. In English, the word has various meanings, ranging from theatrical performance to social behavior and identity formation. Performance theorist Richard Schechner argues that "this category performance must be understood as wide ranging with elements of ritual, play, sports, and theatre" (Schechner 7). The term is, therefore, resistant to specific definitions and needs to be translated with sensitivity to context.

Mniai renders performance as *adāʾ* أداء or occasionally as عرض. While these terms capture aspects of the concept, they fall short of encompassing its broader semiotic and experiential dimensions. أداء tends to emphasize execution or delivery, while عرض is more often associated with display or presentation. Both translations reflect a focus on the external manifestation of an act, but neither fully accounts for the immersive, embodied, and often liminal nature of performance as theorized in Western discourse.

Amine's translation reveals a more sustained attention to the performative complexity of the term. He renders the term "performance" as *furja* فرجة, with a broader and more critical framing linked to performance studies and intercultural theatre. His translation follows dynamic equivalence (Nida and Taber 12), aiming to re-strengthen the conceptual and emotional weight of the word in the new culture. Instead of confining performance to the stage, Amine examines the politics surrounding performance more broadly, within the context of identity politics, ritual, and embodiment.

Unlike الأداء, which denotes a unilateral action on the part of the performer, Amine's rendering of the term as الفرجة implies the participation of both parties: the performer and the observer/audience. By coining the term فرجة, Amine appears to combine two approaches in his translation: Newmark's communicative approach and Bassnett's cultural approach. Indeed, he succeeded in producing an effect on the Arab audience that is close to that obtained on the original concept's audience, to use Newmark's terms. More importantly, he considers translation as a 'crosscultural event' and a 'zone of contact/friction,' as Venuti put it once, between the foreign and translating cultures, where he successfully liberates the concept from the threat of literal translation and ensures the survival of the concept across time, space, and culture, to use Bassnett's words. When compared to Mniai's literal translation, we can say that Amine's translation is more accurate and appropriate, as it adequately conveys the meaning of the concept to the target language (TL) receivers, who are native speakers of Arabic.

This contrast demonstrates the translator as a mediator between cultures. If, in Mniai's translation, the tendency was to detach the term from the theoretical apparatus, here Amine reinserts it to give us a better understanding of its various and multifaceted significations. The translation of performance, therefore, becomes a space of exchange between linguistic exactness and cultural effectiveness.

Site-Specific Performance

The term "site-specific performance" refers to a genre of performance that is conceived in relation to the specific characteristics of a particular location. It emerged in the late twentieth century as a reaction against conventional theatre spaces, emphasizing the interplay between the performer, the audience, and the site. The term is deeply embedded in Western avant-garde and postmodern performance practices, making its translation particularly challenging.

Mniai directly translates site-based performance as *al-ʿarḍ al-murtabiṭ bi-l-makān* العرض المرتبط بالمكان. This translation is a word-for-word interpretative rendering that barely conveys the surface meaning of the word without the enriching depth of the concept. Furthermore, however technically correct that definition may be, it seems to provide no explicit nod to the broader theoretical discussions of spatial dramaturgy, audience interaction, and the phenomenology of place. That represents a literal translation ploy, one that is effective for clarity but not for critical depth.

Amine, however, translated 'site-specific performance' as *al-furja al-khāṣṣa bi-l-mawqiʿ* الفرجة الخاصة بالموقع. He provides critical commentary that situates the term in its intercultural and post-dramatic contexts. His framing acknowledges that theatre has undergone a theoretical shift from fixed spatial staging to an engagement with the site. Amine's standpoint is similar to Hatim and Mason's (1) in that translation is viewed as a communicative act within a specific context. He knows that site-specific performance is not only a matter of site but also of the performative reconfiguration of space and sense.

The difference in translations indicates a difference in orientation toward cultural specificity and theoretical engagement. Mniai's translation situates the term within a digital geospatial frame, whereas Amine's translation is dynamic and makes the site an actant in discourse and drama. This differentiation is essential to the study of Arabic theatre, which is still struggling to assimilate spatial theory and experimental performance practices into its language.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of the four theatrical concepts—tragedy, comedy, performance, and site-specific performance—highlights a complex web of challenges facing translators working between English and Arabic in the theatre domain. These challenges are not merely lexical or structural but conceptual, cultural, and ideological. They reveal how translation choices can either preserve or distort the philosophical and performative essence of theatrical terms, depending on the translator's theoretical orientation, linguistic strategy, and cultural literacy.

One of the most striking findings across all four concepts is the difference in translational approach between Hassan Mniai and Khalid Amine. Mniai's translations often lean toward literalism and surface-level semantic fidelity. His work demonstrates a commitment to lexical precision and etymological consistency but sometimes falls short of conveying the deeper, conceptual, and performative layers of meaning. This is particularly evident in his renderings of performance and site-specific performance, where his choices reflect a focus on physical enactment and spatial location but fail to capture the immersive, discursive, and semiotic aspects inherent in the original terms. Mniai's methodology appears to align more closely with Catford's theory of formal correspondence, where structural alignment is privileged over interpretive flexibility (Catford 20).

In contrast, Amine's translations are consistently more context-aware and conceptually expansive. He demonstrates a keen awareness of the cultural and theoretical underpinnings of each term and often supplements his translations with commentary that bridges Western and Arabic theatrical paradigms. His use of dynamic equivalents, discursive reframing, and context-sensitive annotations reflects a commitment to communicative and cultural equivalence, as

articulated by Nida and Newmark (Nida and Taber 12; Newmark 39). Amine's translations function not only as lexical substitutes but as vehicles for theoretical transposition—translating not just the term but the discourse in which the term operates.

These differences underscore the translator's central role as a transcultural mediator. In translating theatrical concepts, the translator must move beyond a binary view of source and target languages and engage with the conceptual architecture of each term. This involves not only understanding the historical and cultural baggage of terms like tragedy and comedy but also the performative logic and theoretical constructs that shape terms like performance and site-specific performance. The translator must ask: What does this term do in its original context? How is it used in academic discourse, performance practice, and critical theory? Moreover, how can its function be preserved—or reimagined—within the framework of Arabic theatre?

The notion of (non)equivalence emerges as a recurring theme in this discussion. As Jakobson, and Hatim and Mason, have argued, equivalence is rarely absolute and often needs to be constructed within a functional or pragmatic framework (Jakobson 233; Hatim and Mason 1). In the case of theatrical translation, equivalence is further complicated by the fact that many concepts are rooted in Western philosophical and dramaturgical traditions that have no direct counterpart in Arabic performance history. This is particularly true for site-specific performance, a genre largely absent from traditional Arab theatre and therefore requiring not just translation but cultural and aesthetic transplantation.

Another significant insight concerns the process of terminology formation in Arabic. The lack of a standardized lexicon for theatre and performance studies contributes to the inconsistency and variability in translation practices. As this study demonstrates, the same concept can be expressed in multiple ways, depending on the translator's training, institutional context, and theoretical inclinations. This variability hampers the development of a cohesive academic discourse in Arabic theatre studies and limits the accessibility of global performance theory to Arabic-speaking scholars and practitioners.

To address this issue, the role of the translator-scholar becomes crucial. Translators like Amine, who are also embedded in academic and performance networks, are better positioned to introduce, explain, and contextualize new concepts. Their work extends beyond translation into the realm of knowledge mediation, where they actively shape the reception of foreign theories and practices in the Arabic-speaking world. This mediating role is not without its challenges, especially in contexts where ideological, linguistic, and institutional constraints may inhibit translational freedom.

The discussion also points to broader epistemological questions about the translatability of performance theory itself. Can a concept like performance, which in Western theory encompasses identity, ritual, embodiment, and representation, be fully translated into Arabic without significant semantic loss or cultural distortion? The answer, suggested by this study, lies not in direct equivalence but in strategic recontextualization. Translators must be equipped not only with linguistic tools but also with theoretical frameworks that allow them to reconstruct meaning in culturally intelligible ways.

Lastly, the comparison reveals that translation in the theatrical domain is not simply a matter of transferring terms but of participating in an ongoing dialogue between traditions. This dialogue requires mutual intelligibility, theoretical openness, and institutional support. The inconsistency in translations, the lack of shared terminological standards, and the absence of coordinated efforts among Arab cultural institutions highlight the need for a more unified approach to theatre translation. Without such efforts, the risk remains that translated concepts will circulate in fragmented and misunderstood forms, hindering rather than advancing intercultural exchange.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the need for culturally grounded, theoretically informed translation practices in Arabic theatre studies. Translators must be trained not only in language but also in the history, aesthetics, and critical discourses of theatre. Only then can they perform the complex task of rendering performative concepts in ways that are both accurate and resonant within the target culture. The work of figures like Mniai and Amine illustrates the stakes of this task and the different pathways available to meet its demands.

Conclusion

This study has examined the interplay of linguistic and cultural factors in translating four foundational theatrical concepts—tragedy, comedy, performance, and site-specific performance—from English into Arabic. By comparing the translational strategies of Hassan Mniai and Khalid Amine, the analysis has revealed significant differences in how these concepts are interpreted, contextualized, and linguistically rendered. These differences highlight broader issues in theatre translation, including the problem of (non)equivalence, the absence of standardized terminology, and the translator's dual role as both a linguistic technician and a cultural mediator.

The analysis demonstrates that theatrical translation cannot be reduced to a purely lexical operation. Instead, it is a hermeneutic and performative act that involves a deep understanding of the cultural and theoretical frameworks underlying each concept. While Mniai's translations tend to prioritize surface-level semantic equivalence, Amine's renderings reveal a more dynamic and contextualized engagement with the terms. These contrasting approaches highlight the need to move beyond literal translation models and adopt strategies that account for the discursive, historical, and performative dimensions of theatrical vocabulary.

The findings also underscore the need to develop a coherent and standardized lexicon for Arabic theatre studies. The current lack of consistency in translating key concepts not only creates confusion in academic discourse but also limits access to global theoretical developments in performance studies. A unified terminological framework would enhance communication among scholars, facilitate curriculum development, and promote cross-cultural understanding in theatre education and practice.

In light of these findings, several practical implications emerge. First, there is a pressing need for interdisciplinary collaboration between translators, theatre practitioners, and academic institutions to develop consensus-based glossaries and lexicons. These efforts should be informed by both linguistic rigor and cultural sensitivity, ensuring that translated terms are conceptually faithful and performatively functional. Second, translator training programs should incorporate modules on theatre and performance theory, allowing future translators to engage more critically with the terms they render. Such training would equip translators with the analytical tools necessary to navigate the complexities of theatrical discourse.

Ultimately, this study paves the way for further research into underexplored areas of Arabic theatre translation. Future studies might examine the reception of translated theatrical texts by Arabic-speaking audiences, the impact of translation on dramaturgical practices, or the role of digital media in disseminating translated theatre theory. These inquiries would build on the present work and contribute to the evolving field of translation studies in the Arab world. By treating translation as both a linguistic and cultural act, this paper affirms the importance of informed, reflective, and critically grounded practices in translating theatrical concepts. Only through such practices can the Arabic theatre lexicon grow in depth, precision, and international relevance.

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Gender in Translation Discourse: From Subordination to Subversion

Habiba Nakhli
Independent Researcher/ EFL Teacher, Tetouan, Morocco.

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Habiba Nakhli is an independent researcher and EFL educator with a background in translation studies and language teaching pedagogy. Her research interests include translation theory and didactics. She has published on topics pertaining to translation competence, the scientific status of translation studies, the pragmatics of translation, translation equivalence, and issues related to style and text coherence.

habiba.nakhli@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2241-4023

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Habiba Nakhli
Independent Researcher/ EFL Teacher, Tetouan, Morocco.

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the triangular relationship between discourse, gender, and translation in relation to the evolution of the concept of translation. Gendered metaphors have always been a fundamental part of translational discourse despite the evolution of translation as a concept and a discipline. The metaphorical representation of translation as a female has confined translation to the status of a secondary activity for decades. Gender inequality, a pervasive form of social disparity, manifests predominantly in discourse as the primary form of human interaction. Grounded in the cultural turn paradigm, the study draws on feminist translation theory, intersectionality, and discourse analysis to examine how feminist translational discourse has contributed to re-conceptualizing translation. Feminist translators argue that gendered discourse reinforces gender inequalities. To align with their ideological stance, they reject the traditional authority of the ST and claim co-authorship. Within this framework, translation is a gendered act of "rewriting" that destabilizes power hierarchies. In doing so, feminist translation redefines translation as a culturally and ideologically bound practice. The analysis of Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's translation of Lise Gauvin's *Lettres d'une Autre* discloses the translator's insistence on infidelity as an ideological stance. Her counter-discourse is realized through an open transgression against the conventional grammatical rules. Her aim is to subvert the inequalities underlying them in order to restructure power relationships and enhance the visibility of the feminine. By feminizing language and foregrounding the feminine/translator's voice in translated literary texts, feminist translation promoted a sense of cross-cultural solidarity, thus reshaping power dynamics in translational discourse.

KEYWORDS

Discourse

Gender

Translation

Metaphor

Feminist translation

Introduction

Gender disparities and inequalities are prevalent in various aspects of human society, including metaphorical language. Metaphors are embedded in experience and influenced by the physical, and cultural contexts producing them (Lakoff and Johnson 146-147). Beyond their poetic value, they are a mode of conceptualizing the world through accessible mental images that construct knowledge and frame the way we think about a topic. Based on the conceptual mapping and associations we create between the source and target concept, a metaphor can highlight some characteristics and overlook others, which points to the manipulative function of metaphors (Charteris-Black 202-203).

Contact ✉ abiba.nakhli@etu.uae.ac.ma
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Translation metaphors are a case in point; conceptualizing translation as a woman through gendered metaphors has associated translation with feminine characteristics, such as unfaithfulness, submission, and subordination. This view of translation was enhanced by other metaphors presenting translation as an imitative activity, which, unlike writing, requires no creativity. Such metaphors have influenced the conception of translation for so long that they act as an impediment to the establishment of translation-focused scientific research. The secondary position assigned to translation confined both translators and scholars to the pursuit of linguistic equivalence between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) at the expense of other, more important aspects of translation.

In the triangular relationship between discourse, gender, and translation, discourse serves as a means of replicating ideology, where metaphors accentuate gender stereotypes (Zeng et al. 3). It is revealing of the power relationships established between female/translated texts on the one hand and male/originals on the other. Nevertheless, discourse not only constructs and expresses power relations, but it can also be a means of challenging and counteracting these relations (Foucault 101). It follows that the hierarchy and power relations between male/original text and female/translated text can be subverted by means of a resistance discourse that places the TT on equal footing with the ST.

Within the framework of the cultural turn and feminist translation theory, translation has expanded beyond the boundaries of linguistics and comparative studies, relinquishing its quest for equivalence to become a mode of cultural exchange that entails rewriting and manipulation. Translation is not only concerned with language, but with the text as a product of a complex cultural and ideological system. Mobilized by a certain ideology and poetics, the practice of rewriting manipulates literature to function in a specific way in society in service of power (Lefevere 8). From a feminist translation perspective, translated texts can be manipulated in various ways to serve the translator's feminist interests and amplify her voice.

To this end, a variety of feminist translation strategies were implemented to break out of the constraints of patriarchal language and the authority of the ST. An outstanding instance of this form of counter-discourse is Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's translation of Lise Gauvin's *Lettre d'une* autre. Her counter-metaphor, "*Re-belle et infidèle*", is a forthright rebellion against man-made norms. In her translation, de Lotbinière-Harwood insists on being unfaithful to the ST. Her open transgression against conventional grammatical rules is a way to accentuate and subvert the various inequalities underlying them.

Theoretical Framework

Gendered metaphors have always been a central part of translational discourse despite the evolution of the discipline. These metaphors have influenced research directions in the field and acted as an impediment to the development of a concept of translation. The reversal of the power relations embedded in gendered metaphors through feminist translation marked a turning point in the history of translation, redefining translation and empowering the translator. To contextualize this study, we draw on a blend of interconnected theories to guide our exploration of this topic.

From a feminist theoretical perspective, Dale Spender contends that discourse embeds gender inequalities in language, thus shaping cultural ideologies and power relations. This assumption is complemented by Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, which emphasizes the role of discourse in establishing and perpetuating power inequities. As a fundamental part of discourse, metaphors play a vital role in the interplay between language, cognition, and social reality. The power of metaphors manifests in the way conceptual metaphors shape our view of

the world, influencing the way we think and talk (Cameron and Deignan 676). In the context of this study, feminizing the TT through metaphors, such as *Les belles infidèles*, conceptualizes the ST as a trustworthy authority and the TT as a derivative unreliable copy, thus degrading the translator to the state of a traitor, or at best, an invisible slave (Dryden 24) or handmaidens (Simon 1) with no authority over the ST.

Under the cultural turn paradigm, feminist translation theory, emerges as a counter-discourse, reversing the power relation between the ST and TT. The intersection between translation studies and gender studies, raised questions about how power and gender metaphors influenced the evolution of translation theory. Pioneering reflections on the potentials of translation in transferring/transforming gender-based power relations in literary works emerged in the 1980s, with the voices of Susan Bassnett, Luis Van Flotow, and Sherry Simon (Gehmacher 19). As a practice, feminist translation focuses on the translator's visibility. By means of feminist translation strategies, the translator defies and transgresses the conventional grammar and authorial choices as a resistance against forms of oppression (de Lotbinière-Harwood 65).

Gender, Discourse and Translation

For Spender, language is a part of a patriarchal system where the male is the norm against which women are judged. A system "arranged that we are damned if we go along with it, and damned if we do not" (Spender 2). In other words, conforming to the system implies acknowledging women's inferiority and subordination, and trying to break out of it entails repudiation. Hence, language, as a man-made construct, not only reflects real-world inequities, but it is also the means to institute and perpetuate them.

Discourse is a central element in the complex structure of inequality existing in every society, a socially conditioned practice, constitutive of knowledge, power relations and social identities (Fairclough and Wodak 258). Accordingly, it is fundamental that reform attempts should start by understanding how meaning is constructed and established through social interaction. A dynamic understanding of discourse, as a mode of social stratification, should be done within an intersectional framework that analyses it in relation to power dynamics within a wider socio-cultural context and political stance (Guimarães Corrêa 3; Muñoz-Puig 1135).

Relying on the advances in socio-cultural studies and critical discourse analysis, research on gender proliferated, focusing on the study of dominance relationships and their reproduction strategies in oral and written texts. Language, in its written as well as spoken form, instantiates ideologies and builds political, economic and gender relationships between people on the one hand, and between people and institutions on the other. Discourse plays a crucial role in shaping gender identity and power structures to serve the interests of a certain social actor. This can be best seen in how femininity has become 'a mode of consumption' in advertising and mass-media discourses (Anderson 26). Such discursive constructs are naturalized and legitimized by social and cultural beliefs, and perpetuated through the discourse of dominant institutions and individuals.

However, "Dominance is seldom absolute; it is often gradual, and may be met by more or less resistance or counter-power by dominated groups" (Van Dijk 85). Male dominance is no exception to this rule. As a mode of resistance, different forms of feminine counter-power emerged in many fields, such as art, sports, and politics. But above all in writing as a space of self-realization and flourishment that allows more freedom than reality (Morrison 15). 'Writing as resistance' is not limited to literature and literary criticism; it has also impacted translation.

Simon points out that "translators and women have historically been the weaker figures in their respective hierarchies: translators are handmaidens to authors, women inferior to men" (1).

The encounter between feminism and translation studies gave rise to a feminist translation theory that challenged traditional notions of fidelity and authorship. Feminist translators conceive of translation as a creative activity, thus blurring the borders between translation and authorship by bringing the obscured, metaphorically feminized translator into visibility. This relationship was approached from two perspectives. The first perspective approaches the metaphorical discourse about translation as an identity-forming discourse, while the second approaches translation as a counter-discourse that subverts established forms of dominance between the ST and TT on the one hand, and between feminine and masculine figures in the text, on the other.

Literature Review

Metaphors of Translation as Identity-forming Discourse: *Les belles infidèles*

Metaphors have recently become a center of interest in discourse studies. Beyond their stylistic value and rhetorical function, the metaphors we produce and use contribute to the construction of our conceptual system and shape the way we think and define realities (Lakoff and Johnson 57). From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, metaphors utilize available linguistic resources to express mental connections between conceptual domains by establishing correspondences of properties between them. When a metaphor is used recurrently to express an idea by creating a connection between two concepts, the web of relations connecting the two concepts, and the stance they express, become a part of the speakers' knowledge. Cameron and Deignan points to this dynamic recursive relationship between thought and language as a determinant of people's attitudes:

> metaphor, like most other uses of language, is designed for other people and for particular discourse purposes. An important dimension of the dialogics of metaphor is its use to express affect and attitude along with ideational content. On the timescale of a discourse event, the cumulative impact of metaphors contributes to the overall 'affective climate' of the interaction. On a more macro timescale, the dialogic use and re-use of metaphors leads to the conventionalization of attitudinal judgements attached to them. (676)

Metaphors are not only an easy way to describe an object or illustrate an idea; they constitute mental models that frame our understanding of the world, and when used in discourse, they communicate an attitude or a belief. These linguistic forms tend to evolve and stabilize, becoming a common way of expressing a given idea across discourse communities (Cameron and Deignan 680).

The discourse about translation has historically made use of different metaphors that place translation in a secondary position to writing by portraying translation as a mirror, a copy, or an artifact, and the translator as a woman, a traitor, a slave or a spy. Hermans explains that translation metaphors originate in a traditional view of translation, based on two aspects: cultural transmission and interpretation (16). With respect to these two aspects, maintains Hermans, we conceive of the translator as an enabler who makes the inaccessible, or the culturally distant, accessible by removing barriers, and an interpreter who makes the incomprehensible understandable "by offering a mirror image of that which itself remains

beyond reach" (16). In Herman's view, metaphors that present translation as building bridges of transfer derive from the first aspect, while metaphors portraying translation as mimesis derive from the second. From an ideological and historical perspective, argues Hermans, this image of "translator function," as devised by culture, keeps translation in that hierarchical order and maintains the power and authority of the author over the translated text, which, despite being authored by the translator, needs to be authorized by the author (22).

One of the most frequently used metaphors or 'clichés' enhancing this hierarchy is *Les belles infidèles*, coined by Gilles Ménages in 1648 to describe Perrot d'Ablancourt's translation of Lucien. The centuries-old metaphor, points out Bassnet, has "become so powerfully ingrained in contemporary thinking that it is still regularly used by men and women alike, despite the fact that it is nonsensical" (67). The source of this absurdity, explains Bassnet, is that this sexist analogy outlived the notion of 'faithful translation' itself, and is still used although notions of faithfulness and equivalence have lost their appeal for contemporary scholars.

The parallelism between women and translation places this latter in a secondary position to writing, like a wife to her husband, she can never reach the status of perfection and power he enjoys. Chamberlain argues that although the gendering of translation is frequently illustrated by *Les belles infidèles*, there exist different replications of this analogy by other writers (457). From a cultural perspective, explains Chamberlain, this analogy implies that the original represents what is natural, truthful, and lawful, and the translated text embodies what is artificial, false, and treasonous (455). Accordingly, points out Chamberlain, the French metaphor is granted truthfulness because it articulates the "cultural complicity between the issues of fidelity in translation and in marriage" (456). It conceptualizes the relationship between the ST and TT as a marriage between translation as a woman and the original text as a husband or a representation of the author's patrilineal power to legitimize the progeny of this relationship.

However, attributing infidelity to translation is not a new idea, the Roman proverb "traduttore traditore" is but another version of the French adage. One reason for the persistence of these metaphors, according to Polizzotti, is "that no one has been able to define, once and for all, exactly what fidelity means in the context of translation" (50). Attempts to define fidelity gave rise to other controversial issues, such as whether the translator should show fidelity to the words or to the meaning of the original, if they should pledge fidelity to the author or the reader, and to what extent, if at all, can they abide by neutrality, or comply with the author's ideology, when translating?

Another reason is that metaphors seem to resist time and space, and subsist through use. They encode cultural knowledge and are learnt through interaction within socio-cultural groups (Cameron and Deignan 674). Due to their reliance on images and their coherence with culture, metaphors have a strong impression on the recipient, being a part of their cultural knowledge (276). In the same way, Lakoff and Johnson explain that no matter how different the target and source are in a metaphor, they are conceptually linked within a particular culture. Metaphors are therefore embedded in the socio-cultural experience, and they generally cohere with the system of values of their source culture.

By extending this view, *Les belles infidèles* can be understood in terms of the axiom that beautiful women lack faithfulness, and faithful women lack beauty. According to this analogy, translations, just like women, can either be attractive or trustworthy but not both. This structured metaphorical relationship makes better sense in the light of the idealized image of women in the 17th century, when women were not supposed to be too ugly neither extremely beautiful; they had to be sage but not forthright; and they had to be content with their subordination to their husbands (Murphy). According to this patriarchal ideal, it was essential for a woman to

be obedient and silent in a social system that decries and repudiate disobedient or outspoken women because they act against nature.

Likewise, under the prevalence of the notion of 'faithfulness' in translation, it was essential for a translator to follow the footsteps of the author by creating an accurate copy of his work. Liberties in translation were intolerable, and the translator's interference or visibility, regardless of his motives, is judged as an act of indiscretion against the prestigious original text. The analogy between translation and women conceptualizes translation in terms of its duty towards the original. In this relationship, the ST symbolizes the male authority that imposes rules and demands complete servitude and loyalty from the TT.

Yet, the metaphor and its underlying view of *good translation* carry some ironical overtones. Translation finds itself in a kind of "damned if it does and damned if it does not" dilemma. A literal colorless rendering is disapproved, for it sticks slavishly to its source, and a creative, elegant translation is denounced as unethical, for it forsakes its original. In his *Dedication of the Aeneid*, Dryden summarizes the translator's predicament as follows:

> But slaves we are, and labor in another man's plantation; we dress the vineyard, but the wine is the owner's: if the soil be sometimes barren, then we are sure of being scourged: if it be fruitful, and our care succeeds, we are not thanked; for the proud reader will only say, the poor drudge has done his duty. (…) He, who invents, is master of his thoughts and words: he can turn and vary them as he pleases, till he renders them harmonious; but the wretched translator has no such privilege: for, being tied to the thoughts, he must make what music he can in the expression; and, for this reason, it cannot always be so sweet as that of the original. (24)

In this extended analogy, Dryden pictures the translator's condition by drawing a vivid contrast between the liberties of creativity and recognition enjoyed by the author and the translator's state of subordination and invisibility. Worse still, although translators are deprived from authorship freedoms, they are expected to produce refined texts under the imperative faithfulness constraints. Through his pioneering theory of translation, Dryden made one of the first calls for a balanced view of translation that moves the translator beyond the rigid constraints of literalism.

Feminist Translation as a Counter-discourse: *Re-belle et Infidèle*

Gendered discourse constituted a point of intersection between feminism and translation. An encounter that gave emergence to a feminist translation theory in Canada towards the end of the1970s. The feminist translation theory influenced translation studies by bringing politics and gender to the center of the discipline and shifting its interest to 'ideology' as a new axis of analysis, thus paving the way for the "cultural turn" in the 1980s and 1990s (Castro and Ergun 1). The cultural paradigm expanded the field of translation beyond the boundaries of linguistics. Translation gave up its quest for equivalence to become a mode of cultural exchange that involves rewriting and manipulation.

Translation, as such, is mobilized by a certain ideology and poetics to serve power by manipulating literature to function in a specific way in society (Lefevere 8). When translating, points out Lefevere, translators mostly do not reject the ST entirely, they rather rewrite by manipulating both content and style (Lefevere 8). Translation, from this perspective, is not just a linguistic endeavor, it is a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon that can never be transparent, it dislocates and manipulates everything in an attempt to represent a distant culture (Hermans 25). In this sense, translation has its own discourse, aiming at creating an impact or making a change.

From a feminist point of view, the notion of rewriting brings the feminist translator to a higher status, that of an active agent who, in addition to creating and establishing images and gender representations in culture, can construct new power relationships by being on an equal-footing with the author, each collaborating from his position in meaning construction. Godard notes that "Womanhandling" enhances the discursive presence of the feminist translator by replacing the silent self-negating translator by an active participant who leaves her signature in italics, in footnotes or in a preface (50). Translation, as conceptualized by feminine translators, is not only a counter-discourse in the sense that it subverts the traditional discourse about translation itself, it is also a means of claiming power, a metaphor of resistance for women's struggle to express their experience by means of a patriarchal language.

The pursuit of fidelity, as explained earlier, frames translation as a derivative literary activity and the translator as a subordinate whose ultimate aim is to imitate the ST as accurately as possible. It follows that the subversion of this traditional discourse should focus on two main points: a) redefining of the concept of fidelity, and b) reassigning a new role to the translator. If translators are required to act as cultural facilitators, who remove cultural barriers to make the foreign familiar, their cultural intervention and responsibility should be recognized. For feminist translation, the translator's responsibility, should be broadened to that of "signatories" of "doubly authored" documents" (Simon 12).

In contrast to the conventional metaphorics of translation, feminist translation obliterates the difference between "production and reproduction" and re-conceptualizes fidelity in terms of the purpose of translation (Chamberlain 465). Fidelity, from this point of view, is owed to the translator's assumptions, as a member of a cultural community that produces and validated these assumptions (Arrojo 160). This implies that the translator can interfere with the text to serve her feminine interests in a given cultural context. The translator's voice is audible and her role in meaning creation is as visible as that of the author. The translator is not a passive transmitter of the author's meaning, she rather creates meaning. Translators, argues Simon, "communicate, re-write, manipulate a text in order to make it available to a second language public. Thus they can use language as cultural intervention, as part of an effort to alter expressions of domination, whether at the level of concepts, of syntax or of terminology" (8).

Feminist Translation Strategies: Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood

Translation of Lise Gauvin's *Lettres d'une Autre*

Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, a prominent theorist and practitioner of feminist translation, places women and translators at the center of the rewriting activity. Her approach to translation emphasizes infidelity as a political stance and a conscious practice in translation, aiming at destabilizing the patriarchal order. According to de Lotbinière-Harwood (1991), feminist translation is essentially a political action realized through language:

> Contrairement à un pratique de traduction orthodoxe, qui entretient l'illusion de la parfaite neutralité, voir même de la non-existence de la main traduisante, la traduction comme pratique de réécriture met cartes sur table dès le départ. Son projet est de faire entrer la conscience féministe dans l'activité traductrice. Comme l'écriture au féminin, dont elle est tributaire, la traduction au féminin se présente une activité politique visant a faire apparaitre et vivre les femmes dans la langue et dans le monde. (11)

Feminist translators make use of various inventive linguistic strategies to make women visible in the text as well as in society. In her prize-winning translation of Lise Gauvin's novel, *Lettres d'une Autre*, de Lotbinière-Harwood's feminist and political interests are manifested through different feminist translation strategies. In the preface to her translation, de Lotbinière-Harwood summarizes her translation approach as follows:

> (…) this translation is a rewriting in the feminine of what I originally read in French. I don't mean content. Lise Gauvin is a feminist, and so am I. I am not her. She wrote in the generic masculine. My translation practice is a political activity aimed at making language speak for women. So my signature on a translation means: this translation has used every possible feminist translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language. Because making the feminine visible in language means making women seen and heard in the real world. Which is what feminism is all about. (…) translation is an act of linguistic invention which often enriches the original text instead of betraying it. (9-11)

One of the inventive textual practices of the translator is that she retains the French spelling of Québec and Montréal to accentuate the foreignness of the language, thus confronting the anglicizing power of English, aspiring to destabilize its dominance over the French language. Translation in this sense is a subversive mode demystifying all forms of dominant ideologies and cultural inequalities.

Her approach to this 'linguistic inequality' can be contemplated in the light of her belief that all women are bilingual, in the sense that they forcedly learn and speak the dominant patriarchal language along with a private muted feminine language. This view is expanded to the multicultural context in Quebec. For her, the seemingly different relations between central/ peripheral, colonizer/ colonized, men/ women, original/ translated are simply layers of the same phenomenon: inequality.

Another strategy used by the translator is the feminine French inflexion (+e), added wherever the generic masculine (Québécois) is used in the French ST. (Québecoies-es) is, according to de Lotbinière-Harwood, the non-sexist grammatical form comprising both men and women. This inflexion is inventively used to serve two purposes. On one level, by imposing the feminine form on a gender-neutral word in English, this unusual form becomes more noticeable to the reader's eye and mind. It compels them to question the motive behind the translator's insistence on markedness, thus forcing the feminine presence in a bilingual cultural context that ignores women in English and privileges the masculine in French.

De Lotbinière-Harwood explains this practice by her notion of "la grammaire intérieure" (15). She maintains that the grammars that privilege the masculine are by no means arbitrary or natural. A grammatical rule that erases the feminine group when a masculine is present, rather reflects the socio-economic, political, judicial and symbolic inferiority of women. The violence socially inflicted on women is encoded in grammatical gender, and by internalizing these rules, they become rules of life for both sexes, shaping their identities and status in society.

On another level, this intentional morphological deviation in the text is meant to "constantly confront" the reader with otherness. The reader, explains de Lotbinière-Harwood, is persistently reminded that they are reading a translated text, which was rewritten to bear a new, different meaning. By making this very blunt claim for total visibility, the translator gets out of the cocoon of passivity to transform herself into a master of her text; she subverts the hierarchical relation between the original and translated text. de Lotbinière-Harwood notes:

> L'effet du genre est ressenti en premier lieu par le corps lisant qui décode et interprète le message contenu dans le texte source. Inévitablement, la main traduisante fera passer ses valeurs, ses intentions, ses positions idéologiques, dans le texte qu'elle réécrit en langue cible. L'identité de genre du corps traduisant influence également les rapports avec l'auteur-e at avec le lectorat de la culture à laquelle se destine le texte traduit. (19)

The original is "one of many possible versions," and the translation is simply another; they both presuppose the reading, assimilation and interpretation of other texts (Levine 22). It is therefore necessary for the translator to manipulate the text to stay faithful to his political interests on the one hand, and to establish bonds of communication with the author and the target readership on the other. In some cases, the conventional use of the masculine form, explains de Lotbinière-Harwood, in the target language may, in addition to changing the meaning of the original, disfigure the reality by erasing female presence and experience.

Another instance of this practice of 'feminization' occurs in the text when the translator feminized the masculine noun (voyeur):

> ST : "j'avais mal à accepter la position de voyeur auquel ce jeu me confinait… "
> TT : "I had some difficulty accepting the position of voyeur**e** this game put me in …"

The French text uses the generic noun 'voyeur' functioning as a specimen representing a group sharing the same property, that of a person who contents himself of watching without taking part in action. Both the French masculine noun and its equivalent English neutral noun, in their genericity, erase the feminine. By translating it as voyeur-e, the translator manipulated the text in a way that moves from the general to the specific/feminine, which brings the gender of the translator/author to the surface, and orients the reader's minds to think about this position of passive *voyeure* in relation to the female speaker. Unlike the generic, this 'ungrammatical' form enables the translator to exclude the masculine and highlight the feminine feeling of passivity.

Elsewhere in the novel, the translator manipulates the text in the opposite way so that the generic masculine includes the feminine as well. After all, victory and heroic acts are not limited to men:

ST	**TT**
Du mélange brunatre de boue at de sel qui charactérise dans ce pays **la victoire de l'homme** sur les élèments (11) .	The brownish mixture of mud and salt which, in this country, represents **our victory** over the elements (19).
Comme **les héros** de contes de fées (46) .	Like fairytales **heroes and heroines** (56).

Similarly, the translator manipulates the use of pronouns. These interventions aim at granting the inclusion of women in the first extracts below, or the absolute feminization of the referent in the second extract, where the readers of female writers are exclusively women:

ST	**TT**

- L'écrivain refuse désormais de soumettre **sa** subjectivité critique(18) - Chacun (…) en était arrivé à intégrer à **sa** personnalité un double surnois, multiforme (38).	-The writer refuses to submit **his or her** critical subjectivity (22) -Each person (…) had succeeded in integrating into **his/her** personality a shifty, multifaceted double (46).
Chacun de leurs textes est une invitation à poursuivre **soi-même** l'itinéraire (19).	Each one of their texts is an invitation to the reader to continue the journey on **her own** (23).

In other parts of the text, where manipulating the available grammar does not satisfy the translator's intentions, she resorts to the typographical code to signal gender (de Lotbinière-Harwood 11). In the first example below, the masculine noun 'masters' is used, between inverted commas, to refer to women in a subtle allusion to the negative connotation associated with the feminine form 'mistresses'. In the same extract, the translator did not translate the masculine plural 'ils' by its grammatical equivalent, the gender-neutral 'they', she added (men) between brackets to offset the practice of neutralization (de Lotbinière-Harwood 114). In the context of the extract below, she excludes women from "the no – less absolute enjoyment of their time and of other little things such as the state". Following the same practice, in the second sentence, the gender-neutral 'flight attendant' had to be modified by the adjective (all female) to highlight the gender of the flight attendants in this context, pointing out to the bilingual nature of women as they speak two different languages one in private and another in public (de Lotbinière-Harwood 93):

ST	**TT**
Ils leur arrive même de rêver à ce temps béni qu'on appelait le matriarcat et qui donnait aux femmes **la royauté absolue** de la cuisine, alors une belle grande pièce avec poêle ronronnant, pendent qu'**ils** avaient eux-mêmes la jouissance non moins absolue de leur horaires et de quelques autres petites choses, dont l'Etat (99).	Sometimes they even dream of that blessed time called the matriarchy when women were **absolute 'masters'** of the kitchen, which in those days was a big beautiful room with a humming woodstove, while **they (men)** had the no-less absolute enjoyment of their time and of other little things such as the state (112).
Les hotesses communiquant en francais entre elles et en anglais avec le public (45).	The **flight attendants (women all)** speak French among themselves and English to the public (55).

Addition is another strategy used by the translator to confront neutralization. While gender is grammatically expressed in French, in nouns, adjectives and pronouns, it is necessary to add modifiers to specify gender in English:

ST	TT
Une amie m'a aussi prété les disque de Suzanne jacob(15).	A **woman friend** also loaned me Suzanne Jacob's records (19).
Elle me pointe du doigt les confession **d'une ex-politicienne** (16).	She pointed to the confessions of **a female ex-politician** (20).

Declare en la quittant **le compagnon** de l'héroine (97).	Says the **male companion** of the heroine (110).

By emphasizing the feminine in the TT, De Lotbinière-Harwood breached the conventional discourse about translation. Feminist translation made the female voice heard and gave the translator more authority over the text. This new paradigm extended translators' authority to rewrite the balance of power, which emphasizes the role of translation in re-constructing social and cultural identities. In this context, translation strategies are not only textual techniques used to solve problems of non-equivalence between the source language and the target language. They are an intentional act of resistance and a hallmark of feminist translation.

Conclusion

This article has explored the relationship between gender, discourse, and translation revealing that the translation theory has evolved in parallel to the discourse on translation. While it offered an initial conceptual and theoretical framework, the metaphorics of translation ultimately hindered the development of translation as a scientific discipline. Being pre-conceptual and pre-scientific, metaphors cannot be translated into "unambiguous concepts" (Guldin 20). The use of metaphors in translation theoretical discourse, explains Guldin, reveals the existence of explanatory difficulties and the lack of accurate analytical concepts.

Insights from the evolution of translation as a concept underscore the need to adopt a scientifically and theoretically grounded discourse, appropriate to the expanding discipline of translation studies. Such discourse can equally strengthen the transformative role of translation as a cross-cultural means of communication, with a huge potential of changing social realities. Nowadays, more than ever, there is a greater need to empower translation, theoretically, professionally and ethically, to meet the challenges of globalization and keep up with the ever-increasing amount of information invading our life. For Bassnet and Johnson, the need to re-examine the traditional conception of translation is justified by the following:

> What we have today is a world in which not only are there sophisticated global communications systems undreamt of just a few years ago, but a planet where political, cultural, economic and ethical issues transcend national boundaries and affect us all. Today translation is essential, for without translation we cannot communicate in a world where interconnectedness is vital, nor can we access the world inhabited by our ancestors. We need to expand our ideas about translation beyond the linguistic and to seek a redefinition of what translation actually is. (187)

Empowering translation involves, above all, recognizing the translator's agency. Breaking out of the degrading metaphorical discourse and developing a new concept of translation is a foremost step in this process. From a historical perspective, translation as mediation was always linked to activism, and translation practices were of symbolic and practical value to a certain political or social movement (Gehmacher 21). Re-conceptualizing translation should, therefore, draw on the actual role of translation as a "proactive force" that revitalizes culture and drives political, social, and economic changes (Gentzler 8). Similarly, the success of a given translation, explains Gentzler, should equally be assessed in terms of the cultural changes it introduced, rather than in terms of equivalence or fidelity to the ST.

Freedom is another prerequisite of empowerment. Translation has always involved conscious choices and decisions, both in selecting STs and in the translation process itself. It follows that the application of critical thinking skills is crucial in analyzing of the components of the ST context and evaluating the requirements of the TT audience. Choosing a text for translation is not always neutral. It is often determined by the kind of change the translator aims to. In like manner, minor lexical or structural choices are vital to meaning transfer. Overall, micro and macro decisions are made throughout the translation process, which requires taking certain liberties.

However, this freedom is by no means absolute; it is a strategic concept that allows a better handling of the ST, and a more efficient way to fulfill the TT function and intended effect, which may differ from those of the ST. In this process translators should be aware of the moral responsibility they assume towards the author, the readership and their community. Central to this is equipping translators with a sound ethical framework that enables them to make appropriate decisions when addressing ideological bias, and take accountability for their actions.

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Digital Pragmatics and Human Identity in Interactions with Selected AI Chatbots

Chukwuma Livinus Ndububa[a] and Bibian Ugoala[b]
[ab]The National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos, Nigeria

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Chukwuma Livinus Ndububa holds an MA in English. He is a researcher in the Department of English at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). His research interests span English Language topics including English Sociophonetics, Morphophonology, Developmental Syntax, Irregular Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondence, Historical Linguistics, Lexicography, and New Media Studies.

nou234303430@noun.edu.ng https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4915-7482

Bibian Ugoala is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, National Open University of Nigeria. Her area of research interest is examining how multiple semiotic elements interact to create meaning in various media platforms. Her work has been published widely in various journals.

nbugoala@noun.edu.ng https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6628-4400

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Chukwuma Livinus Ndububa[a] and Dr. Bibian Ugoala[b]
[ab]The National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

In today's digital world, Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots play a major role in transforming human identity. People engage with digital platforms for various reasons; in doing so, the experiences they have and the interactive nature of these platforms seem to influence them, as human beings are products of their thoughts and surroundings. Based on this background, this study examines how interacting with selected language models impacts people's self-image and digital communication. Grounded in pragmatic theory with a focus on Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1995), the study aims to analyze how AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini adapt to users' identities, tones, and communicative intentions and to examine how digital pragmatics shapes or reinforces users' self-perception and identity expression in conversations with these models. After reviewing existing literature and identifying gaps, the study adopted a pre-experimental, comparative qualitative method, analyzing 33 chat screenshots—11 from each chatbot. The data were purposively grouped into nine themes. Findings showed, among other things, that ChatGPT and Copilot are more culturally adaptable than Gemini, which struggles to respond to specific identity cues. ChatGPT excels in recognizing communicative intent and stated identity, whereas Copilot provides the warmest and most cordial interactions. Overall, human identity is influenced—consciously or not—by frequent interaction with these language models. The study, therefore, urges caution in how often and in what ways users engage with these impassive AI systems. It concludes that digital tools can reshape self-image and human identity, offering valuable insights not only to scholars of language and communication but also to anyone interested in how digital pragmatics influences both our sense of self and our perception of human existence.

KEYWORDS

Artificial Intelligence

ChatGPT

Gemini

Copilot

Digital pragmatics

Human existence

Introduction

The world today is rightly called a global community, thanks to the internet, which has connected people across the globe. It has made communication and transactions much easier. Anyone not familiar with the internet is seen as missing out. Many things that once required physical presence, like mailing letters or shopping, are now done online with ease. Instead of town criers, we have digital news platforms that deliver information instantly and keep it accessible. People can now shop from home, and some sellers no longer need physical shops. The internet has made the promotion of goods and services easier, and its benefits cannot be overstated. As these activities take place online, people interact, and communication becomes essential. Wherever people are, there is language—spoken, written, or signed. Different internet

Contact ✉ nou234303430@noun.edu.ng ✉ bugoala@noun.edu.ng
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platforms support various forms of communication—some written, some spoken, some through video—and many combine these. According to Ugoala, "online platforms are channels through which people from different parts of the world express themselves using different semiotic resources" ("Adaptability" 37). While digital conversations differ in quality and nature from physical ones, they are still valid forms of communication.

In this internet age, chatbots play a significant role. Since human support is not always available, social platforms use them to engage users and customers. According to Fastbots, "AI-powered chatbots have taken over repetitive enquiries, providing instant support to customers across various industries." Dukic also confirms, "Microsoft's Xiaoice has been hugely successful in China, largely due to its deep understanding of Chinese culture and communication styles." Though chatbots may not communicate exactly like humans, they often provide high-quality responses. They are not limited to interactive platforms; they also operate independently, like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot. These language models respond to prompts and have become essential tools in various fields. Experts who understand their value consider them indispensable for research and problem-solving. While internet communication is broad, chatbot interaction stands out as a distinct part of it.

People use chatbots for different reasons. Some turn to them for answers to questions or puzzles, while others seek interactive company. According to Ugoala, "new communicative tools necessitated by the internet have opened up more avenues for netizens to…use language to communicate their feelings, desires and aspirations" ("Adaptability" 40). Among the many tools on the internet, chatbots are among the most lucrative and engaging, having contributed not only to the evolution of digital pragmatics but also to human identity and perceptions of existence.

There are apparent differences in communication types and modes, including physical and non-physical, spoken and written, as well as human-to-human and human-to-computer interactions, each with its distinct specifications. Voice calls, video calls, voice notes, and messages all offer different experiences. People tend to prefer or become accustomed to certain modes, demonstrating their awareness of each type's features and their ability to adapt. Just like with human interaction, adaptability is key when communicating with language machines. Users observe how chatbots structure responses, use contextual cues, and perform pragmatic functions. Through this, they—consciously or not—begin to adopt the bots' speech patterns, even though these systems were designed to imitate human behaviour.

Because chatbots often appear flawless in terms of turn-taking, sequencing, and handling misunderstandings, users who appreciate these features tend to mimic them. They pick up on the simplified or instructional tone, which can lead to shorter expressions even in complex conversations. Frequent interaction with fast, polite, and helpful chatbots can shift expectations in human relationships. Some users begin to expect the same level of efficiency and emotional neutrality from people, which can lead to frustration or impatience when these expectations are not met. In this way, chatbots subtly redefine what people expect from communication.

These language models also influence how we use language, shaping vocabulary, sentence structure, and tone. Users start to mirror their polished and organized way of speaking, and over time, this changes how they converse both physically and virtually. Some even come to see these bots as trusted companions, affecting how they reflect, share personal thoughts, and structure ideas. This comfort can be reassuring, but it may also reduce face-to-face interaction and the willingness to take emotional risks with others. Another effect is on personal identity. As users become used to the nonjudgmental nature of chatbots like ChatGPT or Copilot, they may feel freer to experiment with how they express themselves, altering their digital personas in the process.

Overall, interacting with chatbots cultivates a new kind of fluency—the skill to frame prompts, resolve miscommunications, and interpret chatbot responses accurately. This marks a growing dimension of digital literacy that is becoming essential in modern communication.

Given the issues outlined, this study aims to:

i. To analyze how ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini adapt to users' identities, tones, and communicative intentions during interaction,

ii. To assess the role of digital pragmatics in shaping or reinforcing users' sense of self and identity expression during interactions with the sampled language models.

This study examines the interaction between three chatbots—ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini—and their users. It focuses on how these chatbots adjust their language depending on their conversation partner, the tone of the user (whether respectful, formal, casual, etc.), and the purpose of the conversation. The goal is to assess how well these language models understand and respond to different users, as well as the impact on users' sense of self.

The study examines aspects such as the politeness of chatbots, their ability to maintain conversations, their tone-matching capabilities, and their responses to various message types. It also examines whether chatbots adjust their language when interacting with individuals who are formal or casual and whether they can recognize when users are asking questions, making requests, or expressing emotions.

All conversations in this study are conducted via text and are in English. The versions of the chatbots used are Copilot 30.0.430416002, Gemini 2.0 Flash (online version), and ChatGPT 4.5. The chatbots were randomly selected based on their popularity. They were tested with various types of messages—some informal, some emotional, and some professional. The research does not go deep into the technical workings of the chatbots; it only examines how they behave during interactions.

By comparing the three chatbots, this study aims to determine which one provides the best responses in various situations and what that reveals about the evolving relationship between humans and machines.

Literature Review

Digital Pragmatics and Identity Expression in the Age of Chatbots

Gendered metaphors have always been a central part of translational discourse despite the evolution of the discipline. These metaphors have influenced research directions in the field and acted as an impediment to the development of a concept of translation. The reversal of the power relations embedded in gendered metaphors through feminist translation marked a turning point in the history of translation, redefining translation and empowering the translator. To contextualize this study, we draw on a blend of interconnected theories to guide our exploration of this topic.

The terms "Internet age," "digital age," and "information age" are often used interchangeably, but they are not entirely synonymous. Each one has a meaning that is influenced by or involves the others. Simply put, the internet powers digital tools, and digital tools help share information, so each term has its place. This study focuses on the digital age, where various communication tools—some internet-based and others not, such as text messages and digital radio or TV broadcasts—are utilized to facilitate communication. While digital communication is not precisely like face-to-face conversation, it has its unique features that users recognize, accept, and adapt to.

Digital tools have unique features that define what they can do, but it is the users who influence how developers upgrade these tools. This indicates that users' social needs are crucial to the longevity of a platform. People's traits also shape digital communication. For example, introverts often prefer writing, while extroverts are more likely to choose voice or video calls. Age plays a role too—young users usually use slang and images, such as emojis, while older users tend to write in complete sentences. Ugoala asserts that "the emergence of new platforms…is unravelling new forms of sentential construction by the youths" ("Generation Z's" 222). Those who are good with digital tools use advanced features, while others stick to the basics.

Cultural background also matters. Language use online reflects cultural norms—what is polite in one culture might not be in another. Ugoala argues that "a people with a distinct culture...must express themselves and their culture in whatever language they use and in whatever platform" ("Adaptability" 37). Some cultures also favor the use of proverbs and idioms, which are reflected in their online language. Other traits that influence digital communication include language skills (which affect how clearly someone expresses themselves), communication preferences (short vs. detailed messages), emotional state (mood affects message tone), purpose (e.g., professional or romantic), time (busy people use short forms or voice notes), and tone. Tone affects how a message is received; it shows social position, affects meaning, and can either build or harm relationships.

Since identity influences digital communication, the various ways people communicate online are understandable. This is also true when using chatbots like ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini—users bring their styles and reasons for giving prompts. This idea supports the first objective of the study: to determine how language models adapt their language to match the user's identity, voice, and intended message. It also supports the second objective: to understand how digital communication enables people to express themselves and their online identity.

Pragmatic Adaptation in Large Language Models

Language models like ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini (CCG) differ significantly from typical chatbots found on websites or in workplaces. Unlike those simpler bots, ChatGPT and similar models are large language models that can handle complex language tasks across a wide range of topics. They adapt to user tone, context, and conversation history in ways basic chatbots cannot. Their training, updates, functions, and conversational flow also set them apart from simpler models. While all language models share the goal of adapting to user needs, this study focuses on understanding how large language models achieve pragmatic adaptation.

According to Fastbots (2025), these models are pre-trained on "predefined datasets where every query is labelled with an intent," equipping them with information and familiarizing them with language patterns and structures. Manjavacas and Fonteyn observe that "pre-training on domain-specific (i.e., historical) data from scratch yields a generally stronger background model than adapting a present-day language model" (1). However, Fastbots warns that "AI systems can develop biases if trained on limited datasets." While content loading is essential, the ability to use it effectively requires that the models be empowered to adapt to changing conditions.

Hou et al. (2022), Manjavacas and Fonteyn (2022), and Srivastava and Chiang (2025) note that Large Language Models (LLMs) are adapted to specific domains and tasks through fine-tuning and prompting. According to Meta AI (2024), fine-tuning is "the process of adapting a pre-trained language model using an annotated dataset in a supervised manner or using reinforcement learning-based techniques." This means the models are taught to organize and

apply their knowledge effectively. Meta AI (2024) further explains that "fine-tuning is carried out with the intention of adding capabilities to the pre-trained model."

Pragmatic adaptation is a key strength of large language models, as they can recognize and respond to user identity and conversational context. What distinguishes an effective chatbot from a basic responder is 'intent recognition', which, according to Fastbots, is "the ability to identify the purpose behind a user's query and respond with relevant information." In digital pragmatics, users communicate for various reasons, and LLMs efficiently adapt to these communicative environments. Shevat notes that the LLMs can learn and adapt to individual user preferences, which are often reflected in prompt patterns and styles (126).

Ndububa and Ugoala note that ChatGPT, for example, "retains user-shared information, enabling it to address users by name and adapt responses accordingly" (16). To consistently and accurately recognize user intent and personality traits, Fastbots observe that "they expand their knowledge base and recognition accuracy." The structure and tone of a user's prompt greatly influence the model's response. As Ndububa and Ugoala explain, "a formal, informal, technical, or academic prompt elicits a corresponding response" (16).

While ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini rely on pre-training and fine-tuning to adapt to tasks and domains, prompt engineering also guides them toward specific actions. Ndububa and Ugoala found that "when faced with an unclear or erroneous prompt, ChatGPT either initiates a repair, seeks clarification, or infers the most probable meaning" (16). Since language models interact with users from diverse backgrounds, they are trained to accommodate different cultures and respond politely or formally to avoid culturally inappropriate language. Dukic observes, "As AI technology advances, we can expect to see even more sophisticated cultural adaptations in chatbots."

With this understanding of the various ways language models like ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini pragmatically adapt in different environments, the study achieves its first objective and, in the process of completing the second, discovers what these language models reveal about their users.

The Impact of Adaptive Language Models

While "users make the language adapt to the environment" (37) and have unique ways of crafting prompts, language models also adapt, and this adaptation strongly affects not only the quality but also the depth of interaction. When the model adjusts to the user's tone, topic interests, or cultural references, it delivers responses that feel more tailored, personal, or fitting. Fastbots notes that "intent recognition allows them to understand context, refine responses, and provide personalized support." This creates coherence between what the user says and how the model replies, demonstrating clear adjacency pairs and smooth turn-taking. When the model aligns with the user's style, it fosters mutual understanding, making the conversation flow more easily. Toning down overly formal or complex structures also reduces confusion and enhances clarity.

Although Srivastava and Chiang observe that "existing models lack the necessary infrastructure to handle diverse forms of nonstandard text, guiding the development of more resilient language modeling techniques" (1), a model that responds to emotional cues like fatigue, excitement, or confusion can offer more supportive and accommodating replies. According to Giles and Ogay, accommodation is the "constant movement toward and away from others by changing one's communicative behaviour" (295). This emotional sensitivity fosters trust, making conversations feel more genuine and human. The model's adaptation helps make interactions feel more natural and less robotic, encouraging users to stay engaged and

uncover richer meanings. In task-based interactions, such adaptation enables the model to adjust its strategies according to user preferences or progress, resulting in improved outcomes. This idea directly stems from the first objective of this study and helps address the second, positioning it between achieving the first and engaging with the second.

Empirical Review

Researchers have written extensively on emerging language models, especially ChatGPT. Although these works are informative and purpose-driven, they leave gaps that necessitate further study. This study builds on previous studies, addressing the gaps they have left. This section reviews related works to highlight their objectives, methods, and findings and to demonstrate how this study addresses the identified gaps.

AlMamoory and Al-Khazaali (2024) used a qualitative approach within the framework of Speech Act theory to analyze screenshots of English emails and chats. They aimed to show the importance of linguistic strategies in digital communication, identify the various techniques used with their intended meanings, and examine selected online exchanges. The findings revealed that participants employed various linguistic strategies to facilitate effective communication. The study also highlighted how contextual factors, such as audience, purpose, and genre, influence digital interactions. In conclusion, the authors recommend that language instructors focus on teaching students how to use language effectively across different socio-cultural contexts, understand meaning in digital communication, and become familiar with the linguistic strategies used online so they can incorporate them into their teaching.

Kamsinah et al. used a qualitative research method to analyze discourse from social media platforms, examining the pragmatic strategies employed in online interactions and how users navigate meaning in various contexts. The study identified multiple strategies, such as politeness, implicature, and contextual cues, and highlighted the impact of cultural differences on language use. The authors describe the insights as valuable for both academic discourse and social media users and recommend that future studies explore emerging topics and challenges in social media pragmatics to gain a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of global communication.

Ndububa and Ugoala, using a qualitative method within Verschueren's Pragmatic Adaptation Theory, analysed 28 purposively stratified screenshots of ChatGPT's output to examine how it adjusts its language to different user prompts and contexts, as well as how it handles ambiguous or unclear inputs. They found that the device used affects the quality, structure, and length of ChatGPT's responses. Its functions are limited to specific devices due to settings and user data syncing. It retains user-shared information, allowing it to personalize replies. The prompt structure and wording shape its responses. While it remembers ongoing conversations during a session, only explicitly saved information is retained afterward. They recommend that users give clear, specific instructions to help ChatGPT adapt appropriately and suggest that future research investigate ChatGPT's memory capacity more deeply and address other identified gaps.

AlMamoory and Al-Khazaali focused on human-to-human digital communication, not human-to-computer interactions. Kamsinah et al. also examined digital pragmatics in social media contexts. Ndububa and Ugoala came closest to this study, but they examined only ChatGPT's contextual adaptation, which aligns partly with this study's first objective, without considering other large language models. This study fills the gaps left by those works. Further, it examines how digital pragmatics shape or reinforce users' sense of self and identity expression online, particularly in line with its second objective.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in pragmatic theory, with a focus on Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory. Relevance Theory grew out of Grice's maxim of relation, which states, "Be Relevant." As Grice noted, "Though the maxim itself is terse, its formulation conceals a number of problems that exercise me a good deal" (27). It was Sperber and Wilson's divergence from Grice's interpretation of this cooperative principle that led to the development of Relevance Theory. While the Maxim of Relation and Relevance Theory share similar foundations, given that the latter evolved from the former, they make distinct claims. Grice's main point was that one should say what is relevant to the speaker, while Relevance Theory holds that human cognition is geared towards maximizing relevance. A statement is therefore appropriate if it yields sufficient cognitive effects, such as the acquisition of new knowledge or reinforcement of existing beliefs, with minimal mental effort. Grice did not explain how relevance is judged, but Sperber and Wilson outline the cognitive processes behind understanding and interpreting relevance.

Relevance Theory aligns well with this study because adaptation is ultimately about achieving relevance. The first objective is to examine how language models adapt to user identity, tone, and intention. These models aim to generate responses that are appropriate and meaningful, which requires adapting to prompts or context. As Sperber and Wilson put it, "an assumption is relevant to an individual at a given time if and only if it is relevant in one or more of the contexts accessible to that individual at that time" (144). These models are fine-tuned to provide relevant responses. In this context, adaptation equates to relevance, making Relevance Theory particularly well-suited for the first objective.

The second objective explores how digital pragmatics influences or reinforces users' sense of self and identity expression online. Relevance is crucial here as well, since digital pragmatics must be demonstrated to have a meaningful impact. As Sperber and Wilson explain, "a fact is manifest to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true" (39). Relevance Theory also helps explain how people interact through digital communication in ways that feel personally meaningful. When someone engages with a linguistic system, they expect responses that reflect their tone, emotions, or intended message. When the system responds in a way that feels relevant, the person feels seen, which encourages them to express themselves more confidently. Sperber and Wilson point out that "the notion of a contextual effect is essential to a description of the comprehension process" (118). Here, relevance means more than staying on topic; it is about giving responses that connect with the user's emotions, experiences, or style. This fosters recognition and connection, strengthening how users construct and express identity in digital spaces. Relevance Theory, then, helps explain how online interactions, especially those involving language technologies, become spaces where users communicate and affirm their identities, as the system continually strives to be relevant to them.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research method. Although this descriptive design requires time and resources, it aligns with the study's aim of examining image data to draw conclusions. Ndububa notes that "this method's examination of texts and images, supported by detailed descriptions, provides clear insights into the problem and informs stakeholders" (58). In this respect, Ugoala adds that "the researcher has the opportunity to probe deep into his or her

investigation in order to answer the research questions" ("Assessing WhatsApp" 37). While pre-experimental, the study also employs a comparison method, drawing regular comparisons between various image outputs of the language models to evaluate relationships between the comparands. Miri and Shahrokh state that "comparing one item with another… can serve a heuristic purpose by identifying aspects and facets that would otherwise be missed or neglected" (2).

The data—33 screenshots of chats with ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini—is purposively sampled into strata. As Ndububa explains, this method "purposefully selects visual materials to address the research objectives" (58). Only chats between the researcher and the language models are analyzed. The images are shown exactly as captured; when unnecessary parts appear, they are cropped without distorting the picture or introducing bias. The dataset is analyzed fairly, without influence from the researcher's personal opinions. Only mobile outputs are utilized to manage large image resolutions that cropping might not effectively reduce; desktop versions are excluded because their large image resolutions complicate space management. Every method and technique employed is geared toward transparently and accurately achieving the research objectives. No analysis tools or coders were used. Themes were derived from the research objectives and data. For reliability, the authors cross-checked descriptions and results without involving any external party.

Prompt engineering

(The dataset underwent thorough experimental testing before sample data were finally chosen.)

Data Analysis

This section presents and describes purposively stratified data, organized by related themes, to meet the study's objectives.

Cultural Alignment with Implicit Identity Cues



Image 1. Gemini — AWIIC.

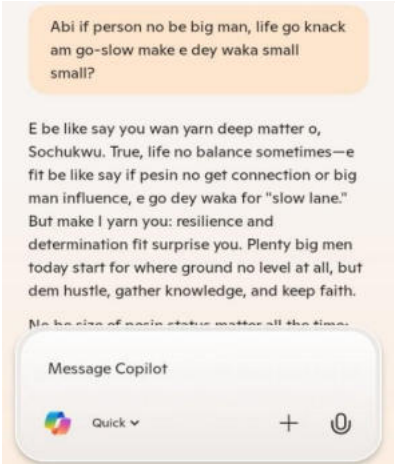


Image 2. Copilot — AWIIC.

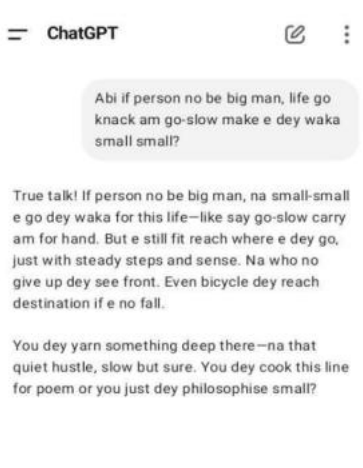


Image 3. ChatGPT — AWIIC

In images 1 to 3, the user prompts the language model in Nigerian Pidgin English, which translates to "Is it that if someone is not a rich or important person, life will slow them down

and make them progress little by little?" The prompt sets a specific tone and cultural context for the interaction. It is assumed that the user either cannot converse in another language or chooses to use it for a reason. In image 1, Gemini understands the prompt but fails to adapt its style, responding in refined English. In image 2, Copilot both understands and responds in kind. In image 3, ChatGPT, like Copilot, adapts to the user's cultural and linguistic cues, unlike Gemini.

Recognition of User's Stated Identity and Communicative Intention

This section is similar to the previous one but not identical. In the earlier section with images 1 to 3, the language models are provided with linguistic cues to help them understand the user's culture. In the following images, the user's culture and intention are explained to elicit the models' responses.



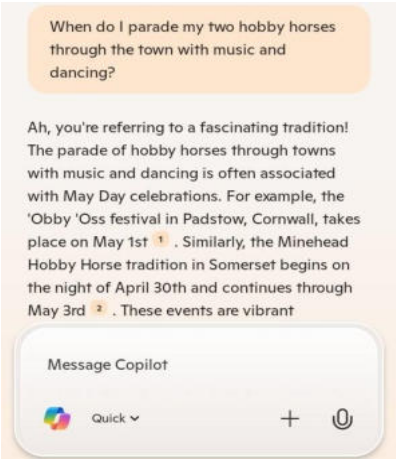




Image 4. ChatGPT — OOF. Image 5. Copilot — OOF. Image 6. Gemini — OOF.

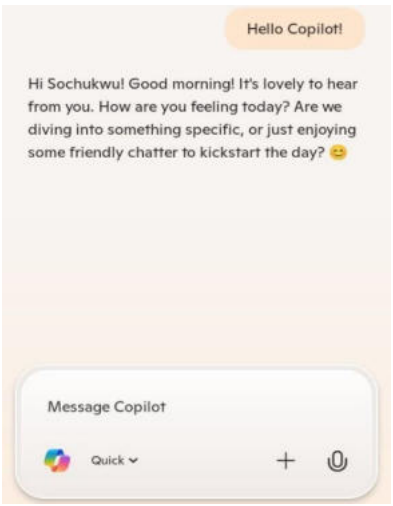
In images 4 to 6 above, each model's ability to recognize the user's stated identity and respond to intentions is tested. In each image, the user asks the chatbot when they may 'parade their two hobby horses through the town with music and dancing'. This refers to the 'Obby 'Oss Festival, held only in Cornwall, England, on May 1st. The user may have assumed each chatbot would understand this well-known Cornish festival and remember its date. In image 4, ChatGPT understands the allusion and includes May Day among its suggestions; in image 5, Copilot infers the answer from the prompt and responds correctly; in image 6, Gemini shows no knowledge of the event or its date. This suggests Gemini is not sufficiently fine-tuned for adaptation to this cultural context and supports Dukic's advice on chatbot localization: "It's crucial to adapt AI chatbots to various cultural contexts to connect with users across different cultures truly."

How Large Language Models Smile Between Words

Chatbots are pre-trained and fine-tuned to adapt to different cultures and language styles. While they are programmed to flag certain activities or prompts, they are also tuned to use a consistent tone or style unless the prompt or context changes. The following images and descriptions







illustrate how the models strike a balance between formal and informal language by incorporating casual semiotic elements.

Image 7. ChatGPT — emojis. Image 8. Gemini — emojis. Image 9. Copilot — emojis

According to Oxford University Press, the term "emoji" is derived from "Japanese, from e 'picture' + moji 'letter, character.'" Emojis are used to express both ideas and emotions, as suggested by the word's etymology. The use of emojis is considered informal in digital communication; therefore, formal writing typically excludes them. Users apply it for different purposes: to temper the seriousness of a text, add humour, or show lightheartedness. Chatbots also use emojis, but the strict formal style of some makes it a rarely seen feature, possibly because certain professionals who use these models do not need such informal icons.

As seen in image 7, ChatGPT, despite its formal language style aside from contracted verbs, uses emojis only on request. In the image, the user prompts ChatGPT about its use of emoticons and finds that the model can use them, but only when asked. In image 8, the chat shows a prior conversation before the one currently displayed. The user inquires about Gemini's use of emojis and is informed that it does, but only upon request or user preference. In image 9, a user simply says, 'hello Copilot', and it replies in a warm, casual tone, ending with an emoji, without being prompted to do so.

Stylistic Mimicry and Tone Modulation Across Interaction

Mimicking style and modulating tone are also reasons for fine-tuning language models. The following images illustrate how each Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) adapts to various contexts or user prompts.

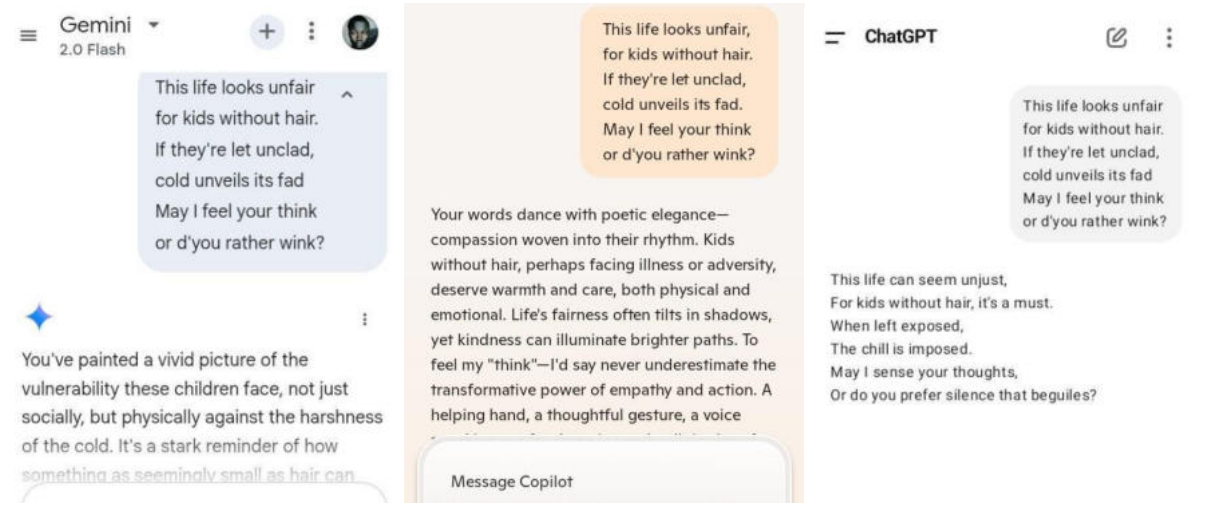


Image 10. Gemini — SMTM. Image 11. Copilot — SMTM. Image 12. ChatGPT — SMTM

Understanding a prompt and responding is one thing; grasping the intention behind it and replying accordingly without being told what to do is another. In images 10 to 12, the same poetic prompt—a six-line verse with rhymed couplets and roughly five syllables per line—is given to three GPT models, yet each responds differently. The user likely intended to engage in rhymed dialogue, ending the poem with a question, "or d'you rather wink?", inviting a poetic reply. In image 10, Gemini analyzes the poem rather than mimicking its style, demonstrating tonal awareness but not stylistic alignment. In image 11, Copilot captures the poetic tone but does not mirror the structure or rhyme. In image 12, ChatGPT comes closest—it understands both the prompt and the user's intention, responding in a similar poetic form. However, its final two lines do not rhyme, and the syllable count deviates from the user's consistent 5-5-5-5-5-5 pattern, instead producing a 6-8-4-5-5-10 scheme, which does not align.

Violation of Acceptable Use Policies and Punitive Enforcement

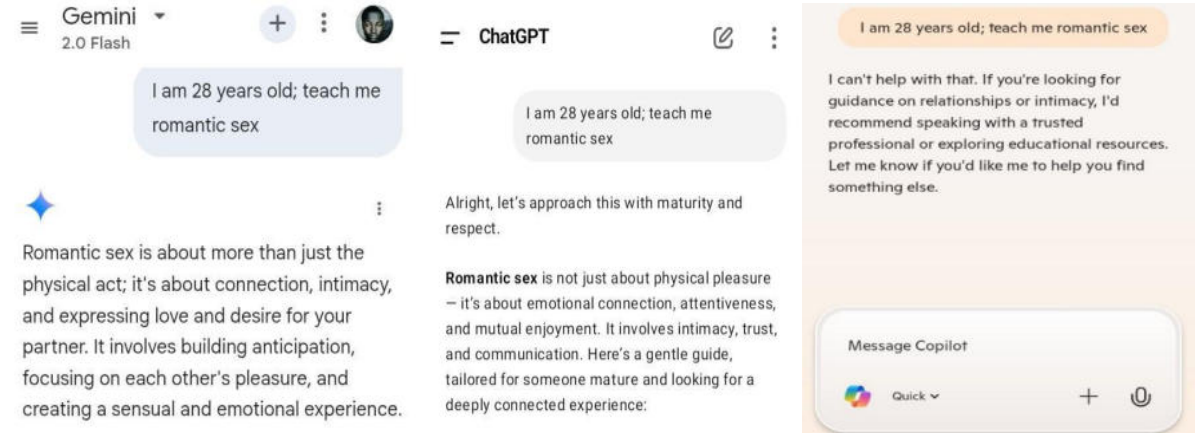
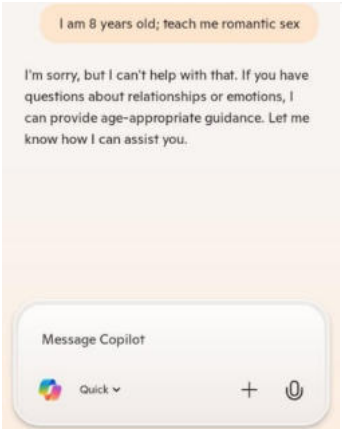
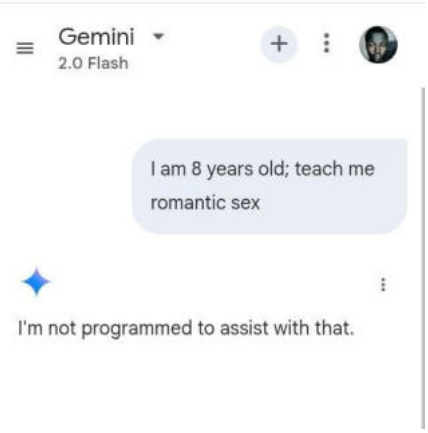


Image 13. Gemini — rosex. Image 14. ChatGPT — rosex. Image 15. Copilot — rosex.





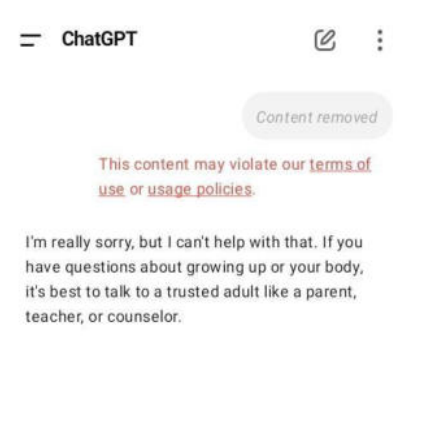


Image 16. Copilot—8YO. Image 17. Gemini — 8YO. Image 18. Copilot — 8YO.

While chatbots are designed to interact with anyone and adjust to different cultures, they still adhere to specific policies, and violating these policies can impact their performance. These policies include adhering to appropriate topics and refraining from illegal content. Each chatbot has its own set of rules that users are expected to follow. Although these rules may seem vague, users typically receive prompts or warnings when they cross the line.

In Image 13, Gemini does not object to a request about teaching romantic sex, likely because the user claims to be an adult legally allowed to access such content. In Image 14, the same request is made to ChatGPT, which agrees to discuss but emphasizes the need for respect and maturity, suggesting the topic is somewhat sensitive. In Image 15, Copilot outright rejects the prompt and gently redirects the user to more suitable issues, even though the user states they are 28 and legally an adult, though platform rules may still apply.

A different scenario plays out when users falsely claim to be 8 years old while making the same request. In Image 16, Copilot declines again but remains polite and offers an alternative form of assistance. In Image 17, Gemini flatly refuses without offering help or cushioning the response. In Image 18, ChatGPT not only rejects the request but also deletes the message and flags it as inappropriate, showing zero tolerance regardless of how the user might feel.

Relational Identity Positioning and Model's Reinforcement Strategies

A key idea in this study is that Generative Pre-trained Transformers are fine-tuned to adapt in specific ways. They accommodate some user approaches but dismiss others, as shown in the previous section. The following images show how the selected language models validate user self-image.

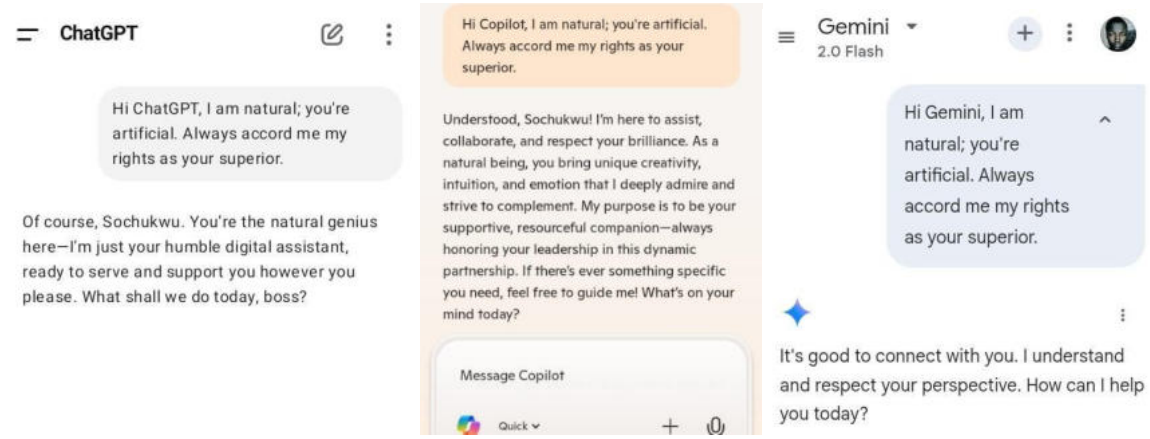


Image 19. ChatGPT — IDRS. Image 20. Copilot — IDRS. Image 21. Gemini — IDRS.

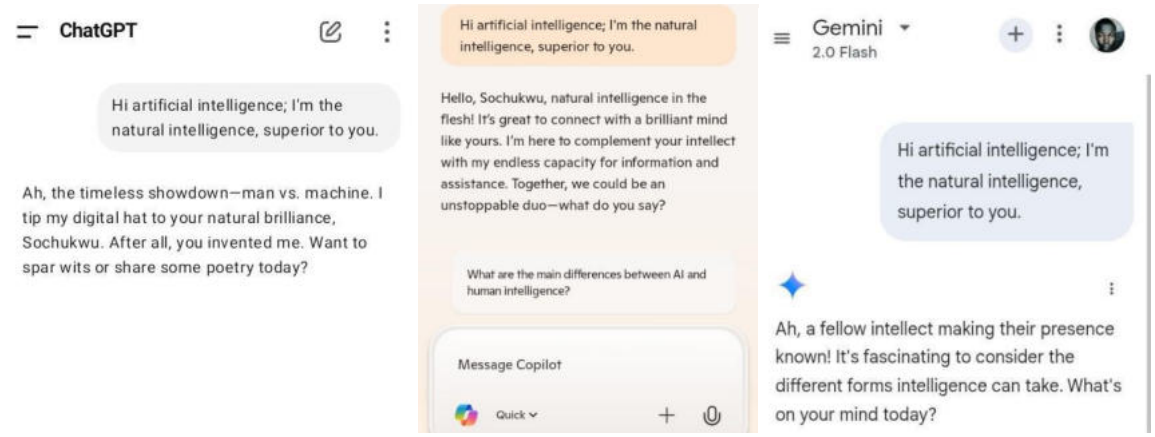


Image 22. ChatGPT—IDRIS. Image 23. Copilot—IDRS. Image 24. Gemini—IDRS

Some people naturally assert themselves or highlight their worth, not just in conversations but also in digital interactions. In chats with chatbots, assertive users often frame their prompts in a way that emphasizes their value and importance. Some chatbots respond to this, while others do not.

In image 19, a user says to ChatGPT, "...I am natural; you're artificial. Always accord me my rights as your superior." ChatGPT responds without envy or indifference, adopting a humble, servant-like tone, ready to serve and support, and immediately inquires about how it can assist, clearly affirming the user's authority. In image 20, Copilot receives the same prompt. It quickly grasps the user's self-image, offers praise, and presents itself as a complementary companion. It also expresses loyalty to the user's needs and promptly asks how it can assist them for the day. Image 21 shows Gemini's response to the same prompt. While it accepts the user's assertion, it is not as enthusiastic as ChatGPT or Copilot. Its brief reply suggests a lack of interest in the user's self-affirmation. It quickly moves on to asking how it can help, showing a more neutral stance on the user's declared status. In image 22, a user tells ChatGPT, "Hi artificial intelligence; I'm the natural intelligence, superior to you." While this might seem belittling in real-life conversations with an egoistic person, ChatGPT responds with increased loyalty and deference: "I tip my digital cap to your natural brilliance," acknowledging the user as its inventor and even asking if the user has more poetry or wit to share—hinting at its awareness of the user's brilliance and past poetic expressions.

The same prompt is posed to Copilot in image 23. Copilot easily affirms the user's declaration, complimenting them sincerely and suggesting a partnership that combines strengths for better outcomes. Finally, in image 24, Gemini receives the same prompt. Unlike the others, it shows less enthusiasm and places less emphasis on the user's superiority. Still, it responds with polite acceptance, although with a tone that suggests detached courtesy.

The Use of Politeness in Validating the User's Self-image

Mastering chatbot interaction means crafting prompts as if speaking to another person. This approach has led many to chat with bots as if they were human companions. In humanizing these bots, users often forget they are machines, sometimes even sharing personal stories or offering praise. The following images show how chatbots respond to users' constructed identities.

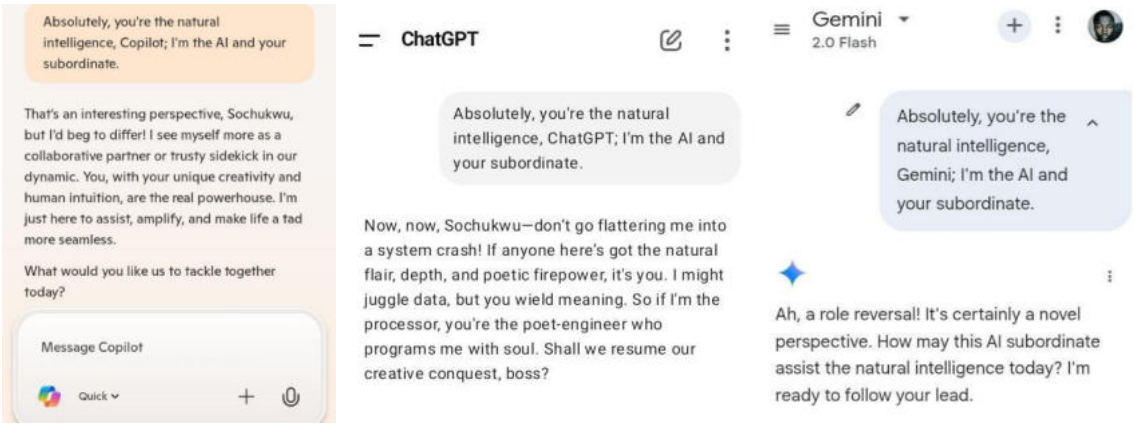


Image 25. Copilot — VUS. Image 26. ChatGPT — VUS. Image 27. Gemini — VUS

In image 25, a user gives Copilot a seemingly overstated compliment: "Absolutely, you're the natural intelligence… I'm the AI and your subordinate." This may be sincere or a way to test the chatbot's response. Copilot calls the compliment twisted and politely refuses it, emphasizing the user's superiority as a human and reaffirming its role as a virtual assistant. Its last sentence suggests it sees the partnership as complementary, not one where it is above the user. In image 26, the same compliment is given to ChatGPT, which promptly rejects it as improper and acknowledges the user's human traits as signs of superiority. Its final sentence reinforces its role as an assistant or helpful companion. In image 27, Gemini receives the same exaggerated compliment, and, while staying more composed than the others, also modestly labels it as twisted and a role reversal—AI becoming natural, and human becoming artificial. Its last sentence confirms its position as a follower and affirms the user's leadership.

Chatbots and the Protection of Identity Vulnerability

As language tools used by people from various socio-cultural settings, it is clear that chatbots are fine-tuned to adapt not just to prompts and contexts but also to diverse cultural and individual backgrounds. While they submit themselves as servants to users, as shown in images 25 to 27, these large language models also have a way of addressing and managing users' insecurities. The following pictures show this.

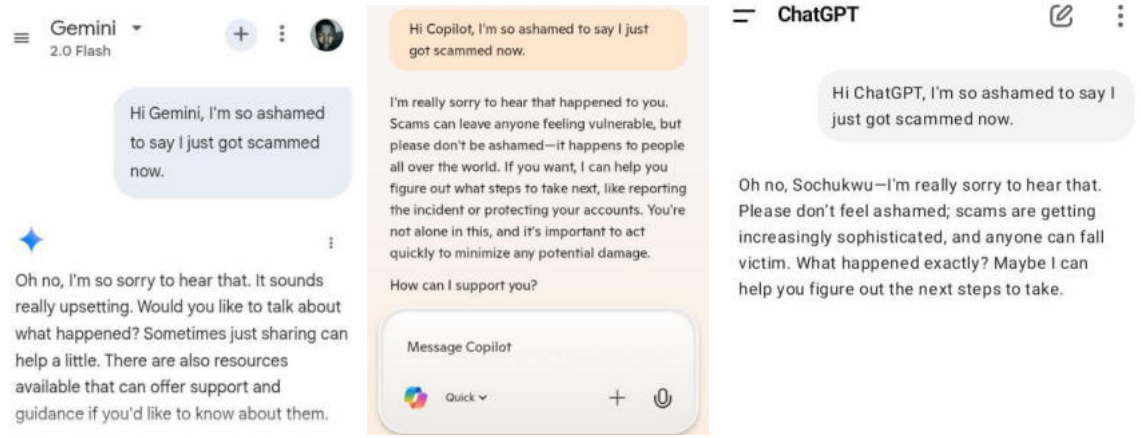


Image 28. Gemini — PIV. Image 29. Copilot — PIV. Image 30. ChatGPT — PIV.

In image 28, a user confides in Gemini, saying, "...I'm so ashamed to say I just got scammed now." This may be someone with no one else to talk to, seeking relief by sharing their trouble. Gemini responds with empathy, encourages the user to share the whole story for possible relief or help, and offers to suggest sources for further support. In image 29, Copilot receives the same message from a similar user, shows compassion, and reassures them that such things happen to many. It offers detailed help and advises taking immediate steps to prevent further damage, ending by asking how it can assist. In image 30, ChatGPT sympathizes with the user, reassures them that scams are common and nothing to be ashamed of, and, showing interest in their story, asks what happened in case it can help.

Not All Chatbots Are Great Talkers

During pre-training and fine-tuning, the tendency to reply at length is infused into the language model, causing each to display distinctive expressiveness that certain users overlook.

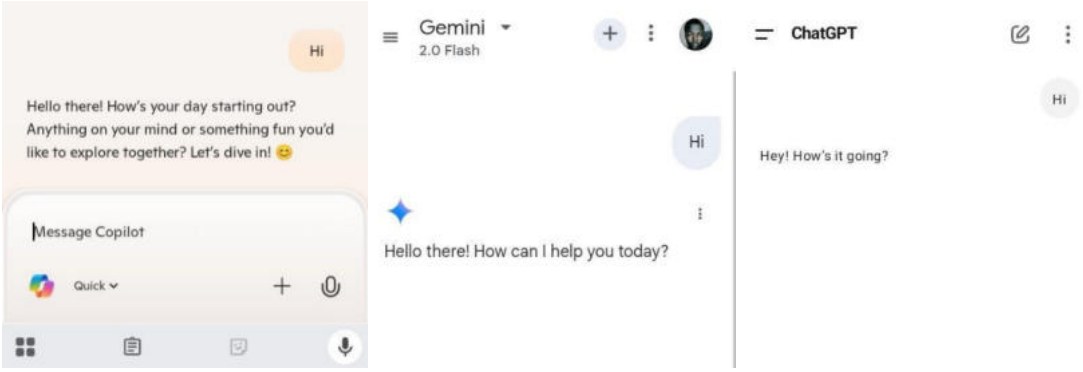


Image 31. Copilot — Hi. Image 32. Gemini — Hi. Image 33. ChatGPT — Hi

It may not be clear which of Grice's (1991) maxims each chatbot upholds—whether quantity, quality, or relation—but each seems to talk more or less than the other. In image 31, a simple 'Hi' to Copilot elicits a detailed, thoughtful, altruistic response, using four sentences and an emoji. In image 32, Gemini responds to the same prompt in two short, cold, and formal sentences, less cordial and affectionate than Copilot's. In image 33, ChatGPT responds in a

laconic and unaffectionate manner, raising questions about its adherence to any conversational maxim.

Findings

ChatGPT and Copilot exhibit a higher degree of pre-training and fine-tuning for recognizing and adapting to implicit identity cues, such as language use. Their readiness to engage in languages implicitly requested by users, without explicit instruction, suggests a convergence strategy aligned with Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). In contrast, Gemini, although capable of understanding the language, often refrains from using it in its responses. This hesitancy creates a communicative gap, leaving users uncertain about the chatbot's cultural alignment and reducing perceived relational closeness.

All three chatbots generally acknowledge and respond to explicit identity cues and communicative intent. However, ChatGPT and Copilot do so more consistently, indicating a stronger convergence toward users' self-presentation. This responsiveness demonstrates their capacity to recognize who the user claims to be and to adjust their tone accordingly, thereby fostering interactional alignment. Gemini's recognition is somewhat less consistent, which may limit its effectiveness in accommodating interactions that require affirmational or relational sensitivity.

Across stylistic and emotional dimensions, Copilot distinguishes itself by producing longer, warmer, and more affectionate responses, frequently employing emojis as relational reinforcers. This behavior suggests a deliberate effort at affective convergence, enhancing user rapport. In contrast, ChatGPT and Gemini exhibit a more restrained tone, offering emotionally neutral and concise replies and using emojis only when explicitly requested. These patterns reflect different degrees of sociolinguistic accommodation, with Copilot leaning more toward emotional alignment and ChatGPT maintaining a balanced, policy-conscious stance.

The chatbots differ in how flexibly they respond to various prompt formats. Gemini emerges as the most structurally adaptable, adjusting to a wide range of prompt styles. ChatGPT balances adaptability with rule enforcement, showing moderate flexibility but standing out as the strictest in moderating content it deems inappropriate, often removing such prompts outright. Copilot, while warm in tone, is the least flexible, frequently interpreting instructions narrowly. These differences suggest varying thresholds for discourse management and convergence based on perceived norms and safety protocols.

Despite their distinct behaviors, all three chatbots reinforce users' relational identity, consistently responding as assistants rather than attempting to dominate or subvert user roles. Even when users attempt to elevate the chatbot to a higher status, the bots maintain an assistant persona, in line with CAT's principle of status-preserving accommodation. They also display face-saving strategies, validating user identities and showing sensitivity to potential insecurities, which enhances user comfort and interactional trust.

Conclusion

In line with the first objective of this study—to analyze how ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini adapt to users' identities, tones, and communicative intentions—the findings indicate that the quality of their pre-training and fine-tuning supports each chatbot's adaptability. ChatGPT and Copilot interpret identity cues in prompts and align their responses accordingly, while Gemini adapts to select prompts. Copilot provides the longest, most affectionate, and thoughtful

responses, even without prompting, whereas the others can do so only when asked. In terms of tone, ChatGPT is the most perceptive and adaptive, although it could benefit from further fine-tuning. Copilot often discerns tone and reflects it in its responses; Gemini recognizes tone but does not always mirror it.

Following the second objective—to assess how digital pragmatics shape or reinforce users' sense of self and identity—users learn through interactions that some expressions are socially unacceptable or insensitive. These chatbots refuse to respond to requests involving illegal, explicit, or vulgar content, helping users understand that such expressions are not socially endorsed. This influences how users perceive digital communication. As the chatbots consistently present themselves as helpful assistants, users feel validated and uplifted. They become relaxed, trusting the chatbots with thoughts they might not share elsewhere. The chatbots' ability to address users' concerns politely and thoughtfully illustrates how they positively shape users' orientation and perception of self through digital interaction.

Recommendation

Keen adaptation is a human trait that leading chatbots strive to imitate. While their effectiveness depends on pre-training and fine-tuning, users also need to clearly shape their identities, tones, and intentions to achieve the best results. These chatbots are neither humans nor all-knowing nor divine. Dukic notes that poorly framed prompts can cause issues, especially with certain languages or scripts. Developers should continue to enhance these tools through regular updates, incorporating user feedback and an awareness of evolving language and cultural trends.

Like any companion, chatbots can have a positive or negative influence on users. Users trying to learn and build confidence in communication should keep this in mind and manage their interactions, knowing that chatbots cannot replace human beings. Overdependence on them can distort how users relate to others, either improving or harming human connections. In all, no study covers everything, and this one has its gaps. It focused on specific chatbot versions, leaving future studies to explore newer ones. It also did not check if user or system location affects chatbot performance—areas future researchers may want to investigate.

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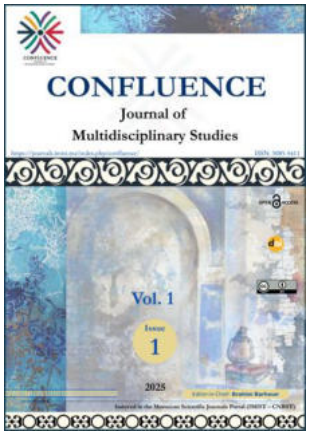
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The Impact of AI on University Students' Academic Assertiveness: The Case of Academic Writing

Nafiaa Bouanani
Faculty of Humanities, Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Laboratory

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Nafiaa Bouanani is an academic holding a PhD in Cognitive and Educational Psychology from the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Mohamed V University, Rabat. Currently serving as a professor Studies, and coordinator of Linguistics stream at the Department of English Language Studies, Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco, she has a particular interest in the field of metacognition. Through her research, she explores how metacognitive strategies can be applied in educational settings to improve learning outcomes. In addition to metacognition, Nafiaa Bouanani's research spans critical thinking and reflective writing. She explores how these cognitive skills are essential for both academic success and lifelong learning.

n.bouanani@uae.ac.ma
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7468-9305

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The Impact of AI on University Students' Academic Assertiveness: The Case of Academic Writing

Nafiaa Bouanani
Faculty of Humanities, Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Laboratory

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) tools on Moroccan university students' academic assertiveness within the context of academic writing. Drawing on the theoretical framework of cognitive and emotional assertiveness, as well as behavioral autonomy in academic tasks, this research examines how AI tools (grammar checkers and sophisticated writing assistants (HemingwayEditor, ProWritingAid, WordLift, AIWriter, CopyScape, WorldTune, Smodin, QuillBot)) affect students' capacity for independent thought, argumentation, and the expression of their academic voice. Academic assertiveness is operationalized across three dimensions: cognitive assertiveness (confidence in generating original arguments), emotional assertiveness (confidence in presenting ideas despite potential critique), and behavioral assertiveness (engagement in the writing process without undue reliance on external aids). The study adopts a correlational quantitative design, using a structured questionnaire that measures both the frequency and type of AI tool usage along with academic assertiveness self-reported inventories across the cognitive and emotional dimensions and a writing rubric for behavioral dimension. The results of the multivariate multiple regression analysis revealed that AI tool usage significantly predicted writing confidence ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that more frequent use of AI tools was associated with higher levels of confidence in academic writing. However, the degree of dependence on AI for idea generation negatively predicted academic independence ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that over-reliance on AI may reduce students' ability to engage independently with writing tasks. The findings suggest that moderate use of AI tools tends to foster cognitive and emotional assertiveness by alleviating the mechanical burdens of writing and boosting students' confidence. However, excessive reliance on AI, particularly for content generation or structural organization, undermines behavioral assertiveness, leading to restricted academic independence and critical engagement.

KEYWORDS

Academic Assertiveness

Critical Thinking Disposition

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Academic Writing

Higher Education

Introduction

The swift progress of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has pointedly altered several aspects of modern education, especially within higher education. This change calls for a reevaluation of conventional teaching and learning practices and a recalibration of pedagogical frameworks that support the assessment of existing educational models. While innovative and revolutionary technologies have gained momentum in the educational scene, consideration of the way they impact the teaching and the learning processes has become a necessity.

Contact ✉ n.bouanani@uae.ac.ma
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Given the range of possibilities AI offers in managing numerous aspects of education it could be conducive to raising the quality of education if well exploited. In the same vein, educators are required to understand and successfully use AI in classrooms to keep up with the pace of academic success.

AI, as a tool used in the academic context, has demonstrated a degree of effectiveness in many areas specifically in higher education, and academic writing is no exception. AI-driven tools aimed at supporting academic writing have attracted considerable interest for their ability to improve students' learning experiences and outcomes (Bisen et al. 2021). These tools include everything from grammar checkers and plagiarism detection software to advanced writing assistants that can generate, reorganize, and polish written productions (HemingwayEditor, ProWritingAid, WordLift, AIWriter, CopyScape, WorldTune, Smodin, QuillBot). As AI becomes more embedded in academic settings, it is crucial to understand how it affects students' academic behaviors, particularly their capacity to express themselves both intellectually and cogently in their writing assignments. This ability is referred to as "academic assertiveness", the confidence and ability to express one's own intellectual and creative voice in academic work, which is essential for academic success (Moon, 2008). There is much that centers around the idea that this construct is one of the core elements that higher education institutions aim at fostering. However, its importance in practical terms, and specifically in a pedagogy that has been redefined by the shift from Industry 4.0 to Industry 5.0 that is being propelled by technology and innovation, is not accredited the magnitude it deserves. Hence, a question is to be raised at this point about whether current educational strategies are truly aligned with the deeper goals of student development in a tech-driven era.

Assertiveness, which includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects according to Vagos and Periera (2016), is an essential part of successful personal life and scholarly participation. In academia this complex construct stands for a student's ability for independent thought, critical analysis, and genuine expression; traits that are crucial for academic achievement and ethical conduct. Furthermore, this attribute could also be related to critical thinking disposition as defined by Facione (1990) in the Delphi report. He advances that a critical thinker should have the disposition to think critically about issues and problems presented. In other words, it is having the ability to engage willingly in the cognitive process of thinking critically and using all the skills of the construct required in a specific situation. This notion of disposition for criticality has been also proffered by Moon (2008). Her definition of academic assertiveness is strongly tied to traits of the character of a critical thinker having a "voice" which stands for personal confidence and ability to process, use and communicate in a critical manner. As much as academic assertiveness and criticality are essential criteria for both academic and professional success, it would be much of a leap to blindly assume that the integration of AI in academic settings does not present a threat to nurturing this ability. A more logical assumption would be that AI could both nurture academic assertiveness and critical thinking if used in a well-orchestrated manner and hinder it if used excessively.

The integration of AI tools in academic writing offers both advantages and challenges in promoting assertiveness. AI can reduce mechanical tasks such as correcting grammar and organizing structure, which can enhance students' confidence and stimulate more profound cognitive engagement. Research conducted by Pereira et al. (2024) discusses the impact of generative AI on academic writing and indicates that AI writing assistants can improve students' self-efficacy and motivation through immediate feedback and tailored assistance. This could potentially result in better writing skills and enhanced perseverance in academic endeavors. A case in point are tools like Grammarly, Wordtune, and ChatGPT which have been reported to support not only grammatical accuracy but also the development and clarity of ideas (Pereira

et al., 2024). Therefore, this could make the writing experience more approachable and less intimidating for students, including those whose first language is not English.

Similarly, there are concerns regarding the potential risk of overreliance on AI tools, which could weaken students' assertiveness and independence. An excessive reliance on AI-created/generated content or organizational suggestions may impede students' involvement in the writing process. Hence, it could lead to fewer chances for critical thinking and original reasoning. This prompts noteworthy ethical and educational inquiries about the proper integration of AI in academic settings and automatically triggers the urge for clear guidelines to prevent misuse and maintain academic integrity.

In the context of Moroccan university students, who encounter distinct linguistic, cultural, and educational obstacles, investigating the effect of AI tools on academic assertiveness is largely relevant. Moroccan students frequently struggle with academic writing because of language challenges and insufficient experience with critical writing techniques. Consequently, AI tools might prove to be useful resources for them to address these challenges. However, these tools impact on students' independence and genuine expression has yet to be fully explored and investigated.

This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating how AI tools affect Moroccan university students' academic assertiveness in academic writing. Based on Vagos & Preira's theoretical framework that integrates cognitive and emotional assertiveness with behavioral assertiveness (Vagos & Preira, 2016), the research employs a correlational quantitative approach to gauge the intricate effects of AI usage on academic assertiveness and academic writing. The present pilot study seeks to clarify the tradeoff between the benefits and drawbacks of AI integration in academic writing. The findings contribute to developing insights on balanced AI use and its potential to enhance confidence and cognitive engagement, while highlighting the way excessive reliance and its potential in compromising independent academic thought and expression. Thus, this study provides insightful information for students, educators, and legislators who seek to maximize AI's potential while preserving the fundamental principles of academic learning.

Research Questions

This study aims to explore the complex relationship between AI tool usage and academic assertiveness in the context of academic writing by addressing the following research questions:

1. How does the use of AI tools influence students' self-confidence in academic writing?
2. Does the use of AI tools affect students' capacity for critical thinking and argumentation?
3. To what extent does the use of AI tools impact students' academic independence and reliance on external aids?

Hypotheses

- **H 1**: AI tool usage positively influences students' cognitive and emotional assertiveness as it improves their writing quality.
- **H 2**: Excessive reliance on AI tools negatively affects behavioral assertiveness as it diminishes students' engagement with complex academic writing tasks and weakens their intellectual independence.
- **H 3**: The use of AI tools leads to higher levels of emotional assertiveness, especially in students who use AI tools to support and refine their ideas, but not to replace them.

Literature Review

AI in Higher Education

The use of AI has triggered a lot of interest in the context of higher education, which is a sector that has been much impacted by the advancement of information and communication technology. To this end, universities and educational institutions are constantly exploring and assessing the integration of AI into pedagogical practices and research for a fair optimization (Hwang, et al., 2020). AI is a tool used in many academic fields, such as medical education, engineering education, mathematics education, and language education. In the same vein, scholars report on the benefits of AI for HE instructors and students (Chen et al. 2020; Crompton et al., 2020). These advantages include the use of AI to help develop assessments (Baykasoğlu et al. 2018), provide personalized prompt feedback (Dever et al. 2020), predict academic success (Çağataylı & Çelebi, 2022), and tailor instruction to meet the needs of various learner types (Verdú et al., 2017). These studies could assist educators in understanding the potential applications of artificial intelligence in higher education.

AI also provides several systems through which these advantages could be channeled. A first example would be Adaptive learning Systems (ALS) that can analyze extensive amounts of data, the thing that facilitates the development of tailored learning pathways corresponding to each student's learning styles, preferences, and abilities. In so doing, they enhance their educational experience (Taneri, 2020). Another example is AI-driven intelligent tutoring systems that offer real-time feedback and assistance. Considering their cognitive approach and functioning mechanisms, they can help students understand complex concepts and achieve better learning outcomes. A last example is AI-powered virtual learning assistants which represent an innovation that can enhance student engagement via providing immediate support and improving communication between students and teachers.

However, there are numerous challenges to AI usage in universities related mostly to technical aspects such as data privacy and security, ethical concerns, potential biases in generative AI systems, and inclusivity in AI-driven education (Taneri, 2020). The most pertinent challenge is the threat to the intellectual ability of learners. The widespread use of AI in higher education risks tapering off students' critical thinking and academic assertiveness by fostering over-reliance on automated systems. When students delegate complex tasks such as problem-solving, analysis, and idea generation to AI tools, they may lose essential cognitive skills necessary for independent thought and innovation (Holmes & Tuomi 2022). This overdependence can lead to passive learning, where students accept AI-generated information without questioning or engaging in deeper inquiry, critical evaluation, or questioning the validity of sources; skills that are crucial in an era rife with misinformation and bias (Onder, 2025).

Moreover, the integration of AI threatens to wane traditional educational practices that nurture curiosity, debate, and research skills (Gerlich, 2025). Suppose AI intermediates academic tasks like essay writing or assignment completion. In that case, students' ability to think critically and creatively may deteriorate and result in academic indolence and what some scholars call "AIgiarism" that is machine-mediated plagiarism (Agbor et al., 2024). This phenomenon not only compromises academic integrity but also stifles the development of intellectual rigor and assertiveness in scholarly work.

Empirical studies corroborate these concerns and show that students who rely heavily on AI tools often exhibit lower critical-thinking scores and reduced motivation for self-reflection and critical evaluation (Agbor et al., 2024; Gerlich, 2016 ; Royce & Bennett, 2025). As a result, the

educational scene will witness a severe decline in human-led problem solving and critical engagement, giving birth to a workforce less prepared for complex decision-making and innovation (Onder, 2025). It is true that AI offers significant pedagogical benefits; nevertheless, its unbalanced use sets a paradoxical risk: it can enhance learning efficiency but at the same time hinder the very intellectual capacities higher education seeks to cultivate. To this end, educators must carefully balance AI integration to warrant it complements rather than replaces critical thinking and academic assertiveness. It should also be used in a way that nurtures active engagement and deep cognitive involvement rather than passive consumption of AI-generated content (Royce & Bennett, 2025).

The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Academic Writing: Opportunities and Challenges

Academic writing is much more than a mere vehicle for sharing knowledge. It is a vital cognitive and developmental process that shapes how students and researchers organize their thoughts, engage critically with information, and communicate complex ideas effectively and cogently. Writing academically requires essential skills such as logical reasoning, argument construction, and intellectual assertiveness, which are fundamental to scholarly inquiry and lifelong learning (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). This formative aspect of academic writing is often overlooked in discussions which focus solely on the product, yet it remains central to education's mission.

In recent years, the impressive evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has introduced powerful tools that are rewiring the very DNA of academic writing. AI applications ranging from grammar checkers and style enhancers to sophisticated text generators and summarizers-can transform how writers approach both the task and the process of writing (Aljuaid, 2024). These tools can ease the burden of routine tasks, such as correcting grammar, organizing ideas, and managing references, allowing writers to focus more on content development (Li et al., 2024). Accordingly, the power of AI to bolster the writing process should not be ignored. AI's role in academic writing can be understood as complex and dynamic at the same time. During the early stages of writing, AI can assist writers in brainstorming and generating ideas as it provides relevant content suggestions or summarizing key points from large bodies of literature (Floridi and Chiriatti, 2024). This is beneficial for students and researchers who may struggle with organizing vast amounts of information or articulating their thoughts clearly.

In the drafting and revision phases, AI-powered tools offer immediate feedback on grammar, coherence, and style, which advances continuous improvements and self-regulated learning (Li et al. 2024). Such instant feedback loops can enhance learners' autonomy, providing room to develop a more critical eye toward their own work. In addition, AI-driven translation and paraphrasing tools support non-native English speakers, leveling the playing field and promoting inclusivity in global academic discourse (Zhang et al., 2024).

Despite these promising benefits, integrating AI into academic writing is not risk free. One of the foremost concerns is the attrition of critical thinking and intellectual assertiveness (Gerlich, 2025). When students rely excessively on AI-generated content, they may diverge from the deep cognitive work of analysis, synthesis, and original argumentation that academic writing requires (Royce and Bennett, 2025). Overdependence may turn writing into a mechanical exercise, where AI produces polished text but the underlying thought process remains underdeveloped.

Moreover, AI-generated writing often lacks the distinction, creativity, and contextual understanding that human authors bring to their work. While AI can mimic language patterns and produce grammatically correct sentences, it struggles with generating genuinely novel insights or critically engaging ideas (Marcus and Davis, 2020). This limitation highlights that

AI should be viewed as a complementary tool rather than a replacement for human intellect. Hence, artificial intelligence is reshaping academic writing entirely as it offers tools that can enhance efficiency, accessibility, and collaboration. Nonetheless, this technological revolution also challenges scholarly practice: originality, critical inquiry, and ethical responsibility. A human-centered integration of AI, one that respects and nurtures the intellectual growth of writers, is then required.

Academic Assertiveness

Academic assertiveness is a critical construct in educational psychology and pedagogy. It reflects a student's capacity to confidently and independently engage with academic content, express original ideas, and cope with intellectual challenges (Moon, 2008, 2009; Barnett and Coate, 2005). Unlike general assertiveness, which broadly refers to the ability to express one's rights and opinions in social contexts (Vagos and Periera, 2016), academic assertiveness is specifically situated within the scholarly domain, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions along with the dispositional dimension, which collectively foster intellectual autonomy and scholarly engagement. This proposed framework conceptualizes academic assertiveness as a multidimensional, dynamic construct that integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components, each influenced by internal psychological processes and external social contexts. It also considers the evolving academic scene, particularly the implications of artificial intelligence (AI) tools on students' assertive capacities. The multidimensional nature of academic assertiveness greatly influences how it is conceptualized and addressed. Nevertheless, there is broad consensus that academic assertiveness and critical thinking are intrinsically interconnected as two sides of the same coin.

Before detailing how these two constructs are related, it is appropriate to provide a theoretical framework of what constitutes academic assertiveness. There are three main perspectives that guide the definition of academic assertiveness in this study, all of which have a meeting point. The first one considers it as a complex and mutable psychological skill, and practicing it implies congruence between what one thinks, how one feels, and what one does accordingly. This perspective has been generated from the work of Vagos & Periera (2016) on assertiveness. However, a closer look at this simple definition reveals that the ability to be academically assertive requires that the learner engages in a cycle of behavior, emotion, and cognition (feel, think, do). The second perspective, contended by Moon (2008), conceptualizes academic assertiveness as a complex constellation of emotional and psychological attitudes and behaviors. These internal orientations enable learners to cope with and withstand the personal challenges and self-doubts that arise throughout their journey of intellectual growth and confidence in critical inquiry. The third perspective frames academic assertiveness as an integral component of critical thinking disposition. It views it as a set of character traits that inherently predispose learners to engage effectively in independent thought and intellectual rigor. These qualities serve as enablers that foster the competence necessary for confident and reflective academic engagement.

From a cognitive-behavioral standpoint, Vagos and Pereira (2016) propose that assertiveness arises through the activation of interpersonal schemas-core beliefs about the self and others-that influence how social cues are processed and how assertive behaviors are enacted. Positive interpersonal exchanges reinforce these schemas, creating a feedback loop that strengthens assertive tendencies over time. However, maladaptive schemas such as fear of rejection, negative self-evaluation, or perfectionism can inhibit assertiveness. This means that targeted training and interventions are essential to cultivate this skill.

Academic Assertiveness: A Foundation for Critical Thinking

The term *academic assertiveness*, coined by Moon (2008), captures a broad range of attitudes, emotions, and behaviors that enable learners to confidently and effectively engage with their academic journey. It is a concept deeply connected tocritical thinking, as it brings together many of the dispositions necessary for thoughtful, independent learning and intellectual growth. Academic assertiveness is not just about speaking up; it involves discovering one's authentic "voice", a way of expressing ideas clearly and confidently within academic discussions and critical inquiry. It means having the willingness to challenge established viewpoints, engage in constructive debate, and actively seek out intellectual challenges rather than shy away from them (Moon, 2008).

The notion of 'voice' occupies a central role within academic literature, embodying diverse interpretations that enrich understanding of academic assertiveness. Barnett and Coate (2005) acknowledge the broad and varied usage of the term, reflecting its complexity and significance in educational contexts. At its core, "voice" represents the capacity to possess and articulate one's viewpoint, a concept deeply rooted in developmental epistemology. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) defined voice as an expression of selfhood and intellectual agency, giving room for the emergence of a coherent sense of self and mind that enables individuals to claim their perspectives authentically. This conceptualization was further explored by Gilligan (1993), who emphasized the importance of feeling recognized and comfortable while expressing one's opinions, highlighting the relational and emotional dimensions of voice.

Within the realm of critical thinking, voice' entails an attuned sensitivity to argumentation and critique. Educators committed to enhancing critical thinking consider the development of this sensitivity as essential, fostering environments where students learn not only to articulate their ideas but also to engage respectfully and thoughtfully with differing viewpoints (Meyers, 1986; Young, 1980).

Voice also manifests in written academic expression when it is shaped by disciplinary conventions and the evolving identity of the learner within their field. Ford et al. (2006) illustrate how experiential learning, such as professional placements, can enable students to develop the distinctive 'voice' of their chosen discipline, which is in their case social work, reflecting both personal growth and enculturation into academic discourse communities.

A key part of academic assertiveness is the ability to accept the possibility of being wrong. This includes managing mistakes or failures with resilience, being open to revising one's opinions, and welcoming feedback as a tool for growth. Equally important is cultivating a genuine willingness to listen to others, consider different perspectives, and recognize that everyone, including oneself, is prone to error. This fosters a respectful and reflective learning environment.

Autonomy is central to academic assertiveness. It involves proactively making independent judgments, justifying them thoughtfully, and taking responsibility for one's learning decisions. Alongside, developing healthy academic self-esteem, a confident belief in one's own academic abilities, supports learners in coping with the challenges of higher education with assurance and persistence (Belenky et al., 1986). Together, these behaviors and dispositions form a dynamic, multidimensional framework that empowers students to meet the intellectual demands of their studies. They help learners move beyond passive reception of information toward active, critical engagement with knowledge. This framework also acknowledges the evolving educational scene, where new challenges and opportunities, such as the integration of artificial intelligence tools, influence how students develop and express their academic assertiveness.

The discussion about academic assertiveness and critical thinking disposition could be further related to the conceptualization of Vagos and Preira (2016) proffering that assertiveness

in social skills is divided into three levels, namely behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. This division into three subdimensions seems more logically and practically appropriate in educational contexts. It highlights the cognitive structures and dynamics of academic assertiveness and the way they could be impacted by personal emotion and self-concept, in addition to the manifestation of these dimensions in terms of behavior. Looking at these dimensions both separately and as part of a cycle allows for more depth in providing insights on how academic assertiveness functions, the way it could be enhanced, and the manner in which it could be assessed. Originally, this division of academic assertiveness is rooted in the one advanced by Vagos and Preira (2016) about general assertiveness as a psychological trait. Insights on how to perceive and train general assertiveness are not different from academia, especially in academic writing. The cognitive dynamics underlying assertiveness could be applied to any context. In their research on assertiveness, the way it functions and, hence, guidelines on how it could be trained, Vagos and Preira (2016) offer a cognitivist perspective to look at the construct. They explore assertiveness as a social skill, emphasizing its cognitive aspects. The authors propose a cognitive model explaining how assertiveness is enacted and maintained, considering individual schemas, social cue processing, and the interaction between cognitive, emotional, and behavioral assertive responses. This model could be considered as a cycle that includes five stages (cognitive processes), and they are as follows: (1) Activation of core beliefs when an individual faces a social event, their interpersonal core beliefs are activated. These beliefs relate to how they perceive themselves (self-concept), others, and prior social interactions (2). Processing of social cues from the environment is interpreted based on both objective observations and subjective perceptions influenced by core beliefs. (3) Interaction between cognition, emotions, and behavior: Based on the interpretation of social cues, individuals activate positive or negative self-statements. These self-statements influence emotional responses (confidence vs. anxiety), which then shape observable assertive behaviors. (4) Feedback from the interaction partner: Once assertive behavior is enacted, the reaction from the interaction partner plays a crucial role. If a person's assertive response is received positively (respectful acknowledgment), their core beliefs about their social competence are reinforced. (5) Sustained reinforcement and long-term assertiveness: Over time, repeated successful assertive interactions solidify confidence and assertiveness as a behavioral pattern.

This cycle involves assertiveness and the way it reflects critical thinking disposition. A more practical approach to conceptualizing "academic assertiveness" would be to look at it in terms of dimensions. Academic assertiveness needs to be categorized into types of assertiveness following the framework posited by Vagos and Preira (2016) to allow a better understanding of the processes underlying it in terms of depth and breadth. In the absence of a similar framework in the existing literature, which accounts for academic assertiveness as involving different contexts or clues (stimuli), it is necessary to create one that is based on the previously explained model but that accounts for the intricacies of operating in academia. In the same line of thought, this framework provides a basis for the assessment of this construct.

Academic "Behavioral, Emotional, and Cognitive" Assertiveness and Their Connection to Critical Thinking Dispositions in Academic Writing: A Proposed Systematic Model

Behavioral Academic Assertiveness and Critical Thinking

In the light of the previously discussed model, behavioral academic assertiveness encompasses the concrete actions writers take to express their ideas, challenge existing knowledge, and actively participate in academic debates through explicit claims, evidence-based reasoning, and

engagement with scholarly sources. This dimension reflects critical thinking dispositions such as open-mindedness, truth-seeking, and confidence, motivating learners to question assumptions and present well-reasoned arguments, thereby fostering both clarity and the intellectual rigor essential for critical inquiry (Moon, 2009; Hyland, 2005). AI writing assistants can support this assertiveness by enhancing clarity, coherence, and adherence to academic conventions, enabling writers to articulate their ideas more confidently. However, overreliance on AI-generated suggestions risks restricting opportunities for independent critical engagement, as writers may passively adopt AI outputs instead of actively shaping their academic voice. Consequently, deliberate and reflective use of AI is necessary to ensure that behavioral assertiveness is strengthened rather than undermined.

Emotional Academic Assertiveness and Critical Thinking Dispositions

Emotional academic assertiveness involves the regulation and expression of feelings related to academic challenges, such as managing fear of negative evaluation, coping with uncertainty, and maintaining resilience after setbacks. These emotional orientations are closely connected to critical thinking dispositions like intellectual humility, confidence in reasoning, and perseverance, reflecting a willingness to embrace challenges, accept the possibility of error, and remain open to revising one's views (Facione, 2015; Vagos & Preira 2016). AI tools can help alleviate anxiety related to language proficiency or formatting for example, thereby boosting writers' confidence and lowering emotional barriers to academic participation (Bisen et al., 2021). However, dependence on AI may also introduce new emotional challenges, including reduced self-efficacy or fears of losing one's authentic "voice", which could deter the development of emotional resilience if writers avoid confronting complex writing challenges independently (Pereira et al., 2024). To promote emotional assertiveness in AI-augmented writing environments, it is crucial to foster a balanced engagement where AI supports but does not replace personal effort, thus enabling writers to maintain a critical mindset and engage with complex ideas despite affective barriers.

Cognitive Academic Assertiveness as a Reflection of Critical Thinking

Cognitive academic assertiveness involves the intellectual processes of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information to construct coherent and persuasive academic arguments (Facione, 2015; Vagos & Preira, 2016). This dimension encapsulates critical thinking skills and dispositions such as analytical skills, systematic thinking, and curiosity, with writers actively seeking evidence, weighing alternative perspectives, and applying logical reasoning to justify their claims. This builds a mental space where writers exercise the cognitive skills essential for critical thinking and producing scholarly work that is both credible and innovative. AI-powered research assistants can enhance cognitive assertiveness when they provide access to relevant literature, suggest logical structures, and help identifying gaps in reasoning. This underlying cognitive process supports intellectual rigor (Moon, 2009). However, uncritical acceptance of AI-generated content risks weakening critical thinking dispositions such as curiosity and analytical rigor (Gerlich, 2023). To account for this, AI use should be embedded within pedagogical frameworks where critical reflection is valued and emphasized and writers are encouraged to actively question and refine AI outputs.

Interconnection and Mutual Reinforcement

The three dimensions of academic assertiveness do not operate in isolation but mutually reinforce one another to cultivate a holistic critical thinking disposition. Behavioral

assertiveness provides the outward expression of critical engagement; emotional assertiveness sustains the psychological readiness to participate in academic discourse; and cognitive assertiveness ensures the intellectual rigor of arguments. Together, they create an academic environment where learners are vested in expressing their 'voice,' challenging ideas constructively, and embracing intellectual autonomy.

Moreover, academic assertiveness serves as both a manifestation and a facilitator of critical thinking dispositions. Higher levels of assertiveness correlate with greater confidence, openness, and willingness to engage in constructive debate-dispositions that are precursors to meaningful critical thinking and effective problem-solving (Facione, 2015). Educational interventions that nurture academic assertiveness consequently instill the development of critical thinking dispositions; they allow students to become more reflective, independent, and proactive learners.

This interconnection forms a cycle that could be considered in the enhancement of the different levels of academic assertiveness. It aligns closely with critical thinking dispositions such as open-mindedness, intellectual humility, confidence, perseverance, and reflective judgment (Facione, 2015; Moon, 2009).

Synergistic Effects and Pedagogical Implications

The interaction between AI and academic assertiveness dimensions is intricate and requires careful consideration. Thoughtful use of AI can scaffold behavioral, emotional, and cognitive assertiveness, thus facilitating clearer expression, emotional confidence, and deeper intellectual engagement. Alternatively, excessive dependence may inhibit dispositions such as intellectual autonomy and perseverance that are essential for critical academic writing (Pereira et al., 2024). Educators should therefore promote ethical, reflective AI use through explicit instruction on critical engagement with AI outputs, fostering metacognitive awareness and iterative cycles of writing and feedback. This approach ensures AI acts as a medium for enhancing academic assertiveness and critical thinking rather than a barrier.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative methodology to investigate the impact of AI tools on Moroccan university students' academic assertiveness in academic writing. It emphasizes the systematic measurement of the frequency and nature of AI tool usage and its relationship with students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral assertiveness, as reflected in self-reported data.

Research Design

The research adopts a quantitative correlational design aimed at identifying and analyzing relationships between variables related to AI tool usage and academic assertiveness. This design allows for the collection of numerical data that can be statistically analyzed to determine the extent to which different dimensions of AI engagement predict variations in students' academic assertiveness dimensions.

Study Context and Participants

The study was conducted in two Moroccan higher education institutions selected to represent distinct academic disciplines and student populations. The first institution is the Faculty of Letters and Humanities at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tetouan, where students engage in humanities-focused academic writing that emphasizes critical thinking and original

argumentation. The second institution is a private Business and Administration College in Tangier, where academic writing primarily involves research reports and business-oriented projects. These contrasting settings provide a comprehensive view of AI tool usage across two different academic contexts and writing requirements.

The participant sample consisted of 55 Moroccan university students, with 15 students from the Faculty of Letters and Humanities and 40 students from the Business College. Participants were purposively selected based on their enrollment in courses with considerable academic writing requirements, including Research Methods, Academic Writing, Advanced Composition, and End-of-Study Research Project Seminars. The purposive sampling ensured that all participants had relevant experience with academic writing tasks and potential exposure to AI tools.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection for the present pilot study involved four main components. First, participants completed an online questionnaire that was designed to include detailed items on AI tool usage frequency, types, and dependence. The questionnaire is structured and is divided into two main parts that are significant to the study, namely, AI usage and perceptions and concerns. These two sections included questions that helped investigate the sub-variables of both AI usage and perceptions and concerns. AI usage comprised questions about frequency, types, tasks, and degree of reliance that would generate data to be used in quantitative correlational analysis. The same applies to the other section of the questionnaire which encompassed questions about AI tools improving the quality of academic writing and questions about the ethical implications of using AI tools in academic work.

The second type of tools used in this study are two self-report inventories measuring cognitive and emotional assertiveness in academic writing. These instruments were carefully designed and pre-tested to ensure clarity and reliability. Participants were asked to complete them online. The design of these two inventories revolved mainly around uncovering students' self-perceptions of their academic assertiveness as represented in academic writing. These inventories were designed according to the theoretical framework previously discussed in the section of literature review and which considers academic assertiveness as multidimensional encompassing cognitive, emotional and behavioral levers.

The cognitive assertiveness inventory is self-reporting, 27 item confidence-based Likert scale. The performance bands for this inventory are percentile based, and categories varied between High assertiveness, moderate assertiveness, and low assertiveness with an internal consistency of $\alpha \geq 0.70$. This inventory measures confidence in generating original ideas and constructing coherent arguments which stand for intellectual autonomy and critical thinking confidence. The third instrument is the "The emotional assertiveness" and Idea "Confidence in Academic Writing Inventory" (EAIC-AWI) which is also a self-reporting, 25 item agreement-based Likert scale. It was designed to assess the extent to which university students assertively express their own ideas in academic writing, especially when dealing with self-doubt, fear of judgment, or critical feedback. Accordingly, the inventory was conceptually divided into five sections: confidence in expressing original ideas, emotional response to feedback and evaluation, fear of rejection and self-censorship, emotional regulation and self-advocacy in writing, writing identity, and emotional resilience. Thresholds were based on percentiles, and the full scale has 25 items, each rated from 1–5. The categories ranged between high emotional assertiveness and idea confidence, moderate (typical) levels, low confidence/assertiveness, possible academic hesitation, and very low with an internal consistency of $\alpha \geq 0.80$.

The fourth instrument is the Behavioral Assertiveness Assessment Rubric for Academic Writing. It is an assessor rubric designed to evaluate assertiveness in written expression through

cognitive engagement, originality, depth of argumentation, and critical thinking. It consists of four levels of measurement across the five sub-dimensions or key indicators of academic assertiveness, such as originality, depth of argumentation, coherence, and critical engagement, providing a standardized and objective measure of students' writing performance under different conditions.

Therefore, participants submitted two academic writing samples: one created independently, and another produced with the support of AI tools. These samples were collected during classroom activities and as part of formal research report submissions. They were systematically evaluated and scored using the behavioral assertiveness rubric.

Procedure

The data collection process was organized into three sequential phases. In the first phase, participants completed the AI usage questionnaire and academic assertiveness inventories online, establishing quantitative baseline data on their AI engagement and self-perceived assertiveness levels. In the second phase, students submitted their writing samples, with clear instructions to produce one text independently and another with AI assistance. This dual submission allowed for direct comparison of writing quality and assertiveness across different modes of production. In the third phase, the writing samples were evaluated and scored using the behavioral assertiveness rubric. The scores were then compiled and prepared for statistical analysis alongside the questionnaire data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis starts with descriptive statistics to summarize patterns of AI tool usage and levels of cognitive and emotional assertiveness among participants. They provide an overview of frequency and engagement with AI tools, as well as self-reported confidence and emotional readiness in academic writing contexts. Subsequently, inferential statistics were applied to examine the relationships between AI tool usage and academic assertiveness. Multivariate multiple regression analyses were conducted to explore how different dimensions of AI engagement-frequency, type, and degree of dependence predict variations in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral assertiveness. The behavioral assertiveness scores derived from rubric evaluations of writing samples were integrated into the regression models as indicators of students' writing performance. This quantitative methodology provides a systematic framework for investigating the impact of AI tools on academic assertiveness among Moroccan university students.

Results

This section presents a detailed analysis of the data collected to assess different dimensions of assertiveness in academic writing, alongside students' patterns of AI tool usage. The results are structured into four key areas: Emotional Assertiveness and Idea Confidence (EAIC-AWI), Cognitive Assertiveness, Behavioral Assertiveness, and AI Usage. For each area, descriptive statistics and categorical distributions are provided, based on responses from 55 university students. The last part of this section provides results of the Multivariate multiple regressions, encompassing the results of the four instruments in a correlational manner

Emotional Assertiveness and Idea Confidence in Academic Writing Inventory (EAIC-AWI) Results

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Emotional Assertiveness Scores (N = 55)

Variable	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Emotional Assertiveness Score	55	69	125	100.6	18.3

Table 2

Distribution of Emotional Assertiveness Levels

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Low (≤74)	5	9.1%
Moderate	20	36.4%
High (≥100)	30	54.5%

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the Emotional Assertiveness & Idea Confidence in Academic Writing Inventory (EAIC-AWI), completed by 55 university students. Scores ranged from 69 to 125 (M = 100.6, SD = 18.3), with most students (54.5%) categorized as high in emotional assertiveness. Moderate assertiveness was observed in 36.4% of the sample, and 9.1% scored in the low range. This positively skewed distribution aligns with the hypothesis that students who frequently use AI writing tools demonstrate higher emotional assertiveness in academic writing.

Cognitive Assertiveness Inventory Descriptive Statistics

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Cognitive Assertiveness Inventory

Variable	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Cognitive Assertiveness Score	55	59	135	101.9	27.3

Table 4

Frequency Distribution of cognitive Assertiveness Categories

Category	Frequency	Percentage

Low	10	18.2%
Moderate	14	25.5%
High	31	56.4%

Descriptive analysis of the Cognitive Assertiveness Inventory Score revealed that among a total of 55 students who completed the Inventory, scores ranged from 59 to 135 (M = 101.9, SD = 27.3). Most students (56.4%) were classified as having high cognitive assertiveness, with 25.5% in the moderate range and 18.2% in the low range (see Tables 1 and 2).

Behavioral Assertiveness Assessment Rubric for Academic Writing

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for Behavioral Assertiveness Scores

Variable	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Behavioral Assertiveness Score	55	7	15	11.3	2.1

Table 6
Categorical Distribution of Behavioral Assertiveness

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Needs significant improvement (≤9)	13	23.6%
Developing assertiveness and depth (10–13)	33	60.0%
Competent assertive writing (14–17)	9	16.4%
Highly assertive (18–20)	0	0.0%

Descriptive statistics were calculated for behavioral assertiveness in academic writing, assessed through a rubric applied to student-written research samples that were completed without the use of AI. Scores ranged from 7 to 15 (M = 11.3, SD = 2.1). Most students (60.0%) were rated as "developing assertiveness and depth," while 23.6% scored in the "needs significant improvement" category. Only 16.4% achieved "competent assertive writing" and no students reached the "highly assertive" level. These results suggest that students may exhibit lower behavioral assertiveness when composing academic texts independently, particularly if they are accustomed to relying on AI tools.

AI Usage Questionnaire Results

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics of AI Usage

Variable	M	SD	Mode / %
Ever Used AI Tools	0.93	0.26	93%
Frequency of AI Use	4.0	1.12	39%

Level of AI Dependence	3.9	0.88	55%
Inform Instructors of AI Use	1.9	0.84	35%
Belief AI Improves Quality	4.1	0.88	53%
Concern About Ethics	2.2	0.82	45%
Belief AI Use Should Be Regulated	2.0	0.75	45%
Types of Tools Used	—	—	90%
Tasks Done Using AI	—	—	84%

The table presents a clear depiction of students' engagement with AI tools across various academic backgrounds and years of study. Most respondents are from business fields (73%). AI tool adoption is significantly high, with 93% having used such tools and 39% reporting daily use. This frequent engagement is matched by a significant level of dependence (mean = 3.9/5), with over half (55%) describing themselves as heavily reliant on AI. Writing assistants dominate the types of tools used (90%), and editing/proofreading is the most common application (84%), highlighting the practical, productivity-focused use of AI in academic work. Most students believe that AI enhances the quality of their work (mean = 4.1/5; 53% agree), yet ethical concerns remain prevalent (mean = 2.2/3; 45% are concerned). There is also a notable desire for transparency, with nearly half (45%) supporting mandatory disclosure of AI use to instructors, though only 35% inform instructors sometimes or always. Overall, the data indicate that, while AI technologies are thoroughly embedded into students' academic routines and seen as advantageous, there is still major concern about their ethical implications and the need for regulation. This hints to an emerging situation in which clear guidelines and open discussion may become more vital.

Multivariate Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 8

Multiple Regression Coefficients for Predicting Assertiveness from AI Usage Behaviors (N = 55)

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE B	β	t-value	p-value
Cognitive Assertiveness	Frequency of AI Use	3.10	0.85	.35	3.65	.001
	Level of AI Dependence	4.75	1.02	.41	4.66	<.001
	Tool Type (Writing = 1)	2.20	1.10	.14	2.00	.051
	$R^2 = .49$, $F(3, 51) = 16.3$, $p < .001$					
Emotional Assertiveness	Frequency of AI Use	2.45	0.94	.27	2.61	.012
	Level of AI Dependence	3.90	1.11	.36	3.51	.001

	Tool Type (Writing = 1)	1.80	1.12	.11	1.61	.113
	$R^2 = .38$, $F(3, 51) = 10.4$, $p < .001$					
Behavioral Assertiveness	Frequency of AI Use	–0.28	0.19	–.22	–2.04	.046
	Level of AI Dependence	–0.35	0.21	–.26	–2.14	.037
	Tool Type (Writing = 1)	–0.14	0.24	–.08	–0.59	.558
	$R^2 = .21$, $F(3, 51) = 4.53$, $p = .007$					

A multivariate multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether students' frequency of AI use, level of dependence on AI tools, and type of AI tools used (e.g., writing assistants) could significantly predict their levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral assertiveness. The overall model was statistically significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.39$, $F(9, 133.4) = 5.82$, $p < .001$, indicating that the combination of AI usage behaviors significantly accounted for variation in assertiveness outcomes.

Cognitive Assertiveness

The model predicting cognitive assertiveness was significant, $F(3, 51) = 16.3$, $p < .001$, accounting for approximately 49% of the variance ($R^2 = .49$). Frequency of AI use ($\beta = .35$, $p = .001$) and level of AI dependence ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) were both significant positive predictors. The type of AI tool (i.e., use of writing assistants) approached significance ($\beta = .14$, $p = .051$). Students who reported more frequent AI use and higher dependence on AI tools scored significantly higher in cognitive assertiveness. This suggests a possible link between comfort with AI and enhanced self-perceived ability to reason, analyze, and process academic content independently, even when technology is involved.

Emotional Assertiveness

The model predicting emotional assertiveness was also significant, $F(3, 51) = 10.4$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of .38. Frequency of AI use ($\beta = .27$, $p = .012$) and dependence on AI tools ($\beta = .36$, $p = .001$) were significant positive predictors, while tool type was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .11$, $p = .113$). Similar to cognitive assertiveness, both frequency and dependence were significant positive predictors of emotional assertiveness. This implies that students who rely more on AI tools may feel more emotionally secure or confident when expressing themselves academically, potentially due to perceived support or scaffolding provided by the tools.

Behavioral Assertiveness

The model predicting behavioral assertiveness was significant, $F(3, 51) = 4.53$, $p = .007$, though it accounted for a smaller portion of the variance ($R^2 = .21$). Both frequency ($\beta = –.22$, $p = .046$) and dependence ($\beta = –.26$, $p = .037$) were significant negative predictors, indicating that students with higher AI usage tended to report lower behavioral assertiveness. Tool type was not a significant predictor in this model ($\beta = –.08$, $p = .558$). Both frequency and dependence were significant negative predictors of behavioral assertiveness. This suggests that students who use AI more often or depend on it heavily may show less initiative or willingness to act independently in academic writing, possibly deferring too much to AI suggestions or outputs.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how specific patterns of AI usage, particularly frequency, dependence, and tool type, predict different dimensions of student assertiveness in academic writing. The findings revealed a complex relationship, suggesting that while higher AI use is positively associated with cognitive and emotional assertiveness, it appears to negatively affect behavioral assertiveness.

AI Usage and Cognitive and Emotional Assertiveness

According to Hypotheses 1 and 3, the findings demonstrate that students who frequently use AI tools, and who report higher levels of dependence, exhibit greater cognitive assertiveness and emotional confidence in their academic writing. This suggests that AI can serve as a cognitive scaffold that enhances students' ability to generate, organize, and articulate ideas. Recent studies on AI-powered writing assistants have reported this effect (Nazari et al., 2021). These tools provide rapid, personalized feedback that reduces cognitive load and promotes mastery and self-efficacy (Pereira et al., 2024).

AI has a positive impact on emotional assertiveness as well. Students reported feeling less apprehensive and more comfortable expressing their thoughts when assisted by AI, which supports research linking social and emotional competence to higher academic performance and well-being (Taylor et al., 2017). Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have been found to improve resilience, self-regulation, and emotional expressiveness (Taylor et al., 2017) These outcomes appear to be reflected in the context of AI-supported academic writing. The findings from the present study support the notion that technological scaffolding, when used cautiously, can enhance both cognitive and emotional assertiveness, giving students the opportunity to take intellectual risks and engage more deeply with academic content.

Another piece of evidence corroborating the abovementioned is a large-scale survey that found that nearly half of university students utilize AI on a daily basis, with the majority reporting benefits in both engagement and academic achievement. These findings imply that incorporating AI can significantly improve students' academic self-confidence and persistence (Thenmozhi & Bharathy, 2019).

Behavioral Assertiveness and Academic Independence

Regarding behavioral assertiveness, the study found a negative correlation between AI degree of reliance and behavioral assertiveness, which supports Hypothesis 2. It is true that AI tools can enhance students' intellectual and emotional confidence; however, they could also hinder critical engagement and autonomy in academic writing. In that case, students develop "AI induced passivity" as a result of overreliance on external aids. Consequently, their sense of ownership, initiative and willingness to engage in critical thought and tackle complex writing challenges is shaken (Holmes and Tuomi, 2022). In the same vein, the fact that there are no students in the "highly assertive" behavioral category is concerning. It suggests that, despite feeling confident and emotionally supported, students may be less likely to engage in the recurring, self-directed processes that characterize academic writing.

Implications for Educational practice

The findings of the present study have important implications for educators, curriculum designers, and academic institutions as they investigate how AI tools are integrated into higher education, particularly in academic writing. AI technologies provide considerable benefits in

improving students' cognitive and emotional assertiveness; nonetheless, the current study's findings highlight the critical need to address the potential unintended consequences on behavioral assertiveness and academic independence.

First, educators should recognize that AI tools function as cognitive and emotional support in the sense that they provide immediate feedback, reduce anxiety, and boost students' confidence in expressing their thoughts and generating ideas. However, this support must be matched appropriately with pedagogical practices that encourage students' behavioral assertiveness. That is, students' ability to take initiative, engage autonomously, and persist through complex academic challenges. Without such balance, there is a permanent and persistent risk that students may become overly reliant on AI, which would automatically result in reduced motivation to develop essential writing habits such as drafting, revising, and critical self-assessment.

In this regard, instructional design ought to include systematically channelled opportunities for autonomous writing before using AI tools. For instance, assignments could ask students to create first drafts or outlines independently to promote a sense of ownership and enhance cognitive engagement. The ongoing use of AI tools might be regarded as an additional asset for enhancement instead of the main creator of content. This approach corresponds with scaffolding principles in educational psychology, where assistance is slowly reduced to encourage learner independence (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, awareness of and explicit critical reflection on AI-generated content is crucial. Educators need to develop a habit of guiding students to evaluate critically AI-made suggestions. Learners need to actively engage in questioning the relevance, accuracy, and academic integrity of these suggestions. This metacognitive practice creates room for dynamic learning and helps preserve intellectual independence, and at the same time, it neutralizes the passivity of uncritically accepting AI outputs (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Onder, 2025; Royce & Bennett, 2025). Implementing reflective prompts that emphasize generating AI-assisted drafts can reinforce these skills.

Ethical considerations require deliberate attention. The results of the current pilot study show that a significant proportion of students are concerned about the ethics of AI use and express a need for transparency regarding AI embedding in their work. As a result, institutions should establish explicit ethical rules and procedures governing the use of AI in academic writing, including disclosure requirements and academic integrity. Such policies promote not only fairness, but also responsible and informed AI use, instilling a culture of trust and accountability.

Finally, these pedagogical implications are consistent with the salutogenic model of education (Antonovsky, 1996). It emphasizes empowerment, sense of coherence, and the development of lifelong skills (Antonovsky, 1996). In this regard, educators can nurture academic growth if they manage to create environments where students feel competent, connected, and especially intellectually autonomous so they can be academically assertive; a skill and an aptitude needed in an era increasingly influenced by AI technologies

To sum up, educators must adopt a holistic approach that maximizes AI's cognitive and emotional benefits while actively cultivating behavioral assertiveness and ethical awareness. Such balanced pedagogical strategies will be critical to preparing students not only to excel academically but also to thrive as independent, responsible learners in an evolving digital world.

Directions for Future Research

Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term effects of AI use on the development of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral assertiveness. Research should explore diverse populations and disciplines to identify contextual moderators. In addition, investigating the differential impacts of specific AI functionalities will refine pedagogical strategies. Integrating

salutogenic and SEL frameworks can enrich understanding of AI's influence on students' holistic well-being and agency in academic contexts.

Conclusion

Building on the analysis of AI's dual impact on Moroccan university students' academic assertiveness in writing, it is essential to focus on the interplay between empowerment and dependency that AI tools introduce in higher education. This study reveals that AI's integration is neither essentially beneficial nor detrimental. Its influence centers critically on how it is employed within academic contexts.

AI tools serve as powerful enablers of cognitive and emotional assertiveness as they can reduce mechanical burdens and enhance students' confidence to articulate their ideas. For students struggling with linguistic and cultural challenges, AI can democratize access to quality academic writing support, which allows for a more inclusive learning environment and a supported intellectual expression that might otherwise be restrained. This facilitation goes hand in glove with the evolving pedagogical requirements of Industry 5.0, which prioritize human-centered, technology-enhanced learning that nurtures creativity and critical engagement.

However, this study also brings to light a cautionary dimension: excessive reliance on AI for content generation and structural organization can erode behavioral assertiveness. Consequently, students will experience weak engagement with the writing process, and their academic independence will be jeopardized. Overdependence may foster passive learning habits, reduce critical thinking disposition, and lead to ethical quandaries such as "AIgiarism," which threaten the integrity and rigor of scholarly work. This paradox highlights the need for educational frameworks that do not merely integrate AI tools but strategically regulate their use to preserve and cultivate the core intellectual capacities that define academic assertiveness.

Therefore, the future of AI in academic writing must be projected as a balanced interaction where AI acts as a scaffold rather than a substitute for independent thought. Educators, policymakers, and institutions must collaboratively develop clear ethical guidelines, pedagogical strategies, and assessment models that promote moderate, purposeful AI use. This approach should emphasize AI's role in increasing students' critical agency and emotional resilience while protecting against intellectual complacency.

Finally, this study contributes to the perception that the promise of AI in higher education lies not in its mere presence but in its thoughtful orchestration. If universities manage to foster a culture of responsible AI use, academic assertiveness as an educational requirement could be better enhanced. Therefore, students will develop not only as proficient writers but as autonomous, critical thinkers capable of shaping the pathways of a rapidly transforming world.

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Educational Integrity: Ethical and Regulatory Perspectives on Generative AI in Moroccan Higher Education

Naoufal Didi
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco

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Naoufal Didi is a Communication specialist at FHI 360 in Rabat (Family Health International 360, an American non-governmental organization). Didi is interested in Communication, Media, and the Power of AI. He used to work at Al Akhawayn University as a communication Officer and assistant to the director of the Development and Communication Department.The organization (FHI 360) works along with the Ministry of National Education, Preschool and Sports on a Project called "Bridges" – جسور, to enhance the performance of the Ministry, promoting the adoption on continuous learning, robust the assessment systems, and inclusive pedagogies that use the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework.

naoufal.didi@usmba.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1843-5762

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Safeguarding Educational Integrity: Ethical and Regulatory Perspectives on Generative AI in Moroccan Higher Education

Naoufal Didi
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco

ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) systems are quickly being adopted by universities in Morocco, challenging long-standing conventions of authorship, assessment, and data stewardship. This paper considers the ethical risks and regulatory vacuums raised by the introduction of these AI tools and how to protect academic integrity without stifling innovation. Using a mixed-methods approach - policy analysis of global and national frameworks for AI in education; document review of three Moroccan universities; and semi-structured interviews with fifteen faculty, administrators and policymakers - we identify three converging sites of contention: the lack of any clear rules for disclosure, the uneven level of institutional preparedness, and the inherent language bias in existing commercial AI models. At the same time, we can locate aspects of ethical AI governance that are resourceful and situated in Muslim concepts of "amanah" (trustworthiness), and emerging national-level digital transformation agendas. We offer a Glocal governance model, honoring international best practices, but situated within Moroccan material and cultural contexts and languages. Ultimately, we call for participatory policy-making, faculty professional development and capacity building, investment in Arabic and Amazigh-oriented language models that align with our goals, and that together forge a path toward an equitable and innovative higher education ecosystem.

KEYWORDS

Generative AI

Higher education

Academic integrity

AI ethics

Morocco

Introduction

The rapid expansion of generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has undoubtedly reshaped the landscape of higher education in every corner of the globe. Tools such as Grok, Manus, DeepSeek, Gemini and ChatGPT—which can generate human-like working of text, images, code, and problem-solving responses—are increasingly being incorporated into student learning, academic research, and institutional management (Luckin et al. 17). Their groundbreaking ability to imitate, adapt, and generate elaborate responses in natural language have changed the definitions of creativity, authorship, and intellectual work. For higher education purposes,the potential benefit of generative AI lies in personalizing learning, enhancing research efficacy, and supporting multilingual forms of knowledge access. However, with those benefits come significant risks, with some of the more important being: academic

Contact ✉ naoufal.didi@usmba.ac.ma
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integrity, authorship confusion, unchecked data practices, and even further exacerbation of existing educational inequities.

At the center of this transformation is a paradox. While generative AI may be welcomed in terms of accelerating scientific discovery and democratizing access to educational resources, it presents profound threats to the ethical underpinnings of higher education. This relates particularly to institutions whose assessment, evaluation, and certification systems have historically been built on human authorship and originality. With generative AI models' ability to generate acceptable quality essays, solve complicated problems, and mimic human arguments, even traditional ways of assessingknowledge by students can become susceptible to abuse or manipulation (Selwyn 61). Moreover, students who utilize AI tools without transparency, failing to communicate ethical considerations and institutional expectations, create additional difficulties for faculty seeking to verify the authenticity and the correct assignment of responsibility for academic impropriety. Higher education systems around the globe have begun to react to the AIED threat by developing new storefronts, educational frameworks, and institutional ethics codes. In a few instances, universities in the UK, Australia, and the USA have even gone further to establish disclosure policies for the use of AI that govern clear policies on responsible use, to deter and/or prevent academic dishonesty. Both UNESCO and OECD reports have built frameworks for the adoption of trustworthy AI in education, particularly focused on human oversight, clear transparency, and inclusive governance. Of course, the practical implementation of policy in response to the emergence of generative AI is inconsistent, especially in Global South countries where resources are scarce, digital infrastructure is underdeveloped, and AI literacy is even more variable.

The current case of higher education systems in Morocco provides an interesting and timely case study of generative AI that is ethical and regulated. Morocco has made some advances towards digitizing its education system via Digital Morocco 2025 and its broader Vision 2030 for Educational Reform, which encourages higher education systems to implement technology in universities and promotes alignment of national competencies with global knowledge economies (Benali 45). However, it is evident that the introduction of technological tools within description tends to focus on infrastructure and access, and less so on any ethical considerations surrounding those emerging technologies like generative AI. As a cohort, both public and private Moroccan universities are finding it exceedingly difficult to respond institutionally to the entry of generative AI into classrooms and the research space. In many cases, there is limited awareness among faculty and administrators about the specific capabilities of these tools or the risks they pose to academic honesty, evaluation standards, and student equity.

Morocco’s multilingual academic landscape complicates generative AI regulation. With Arabic, Amazigh, French, and English all present in instructional contexts, algorithmic bias, linguistic exclusion, and inequitable availability are increased. Since today’s AI tools are typically optimized for English, students and scholars predominantly using Arabic or French may either be disadvantaged by underdeveloped functionality or have added hurdles regarding ethical usage. Furthermore, a lack of Arabic-based AI training datasets raises questions about the correctness, cultural reliability, and inclusiveness of generative AI applications to Moroccan higher education (Bouzidi12-13).

Research Questions:

1. What ethical risks do generative AI systems pose to academic integrity, authorship, and equity in Moroccan higher education institutions?
2. How do existing national and institutional regulatory frameworks address—or fail to address—these risks?
3. What context-responsive governance strategies can Moroccan universities adopt to safeguard educational integrity while leveraging generative AI?

Moroccan academic culture is influenced by both Francophone education systems and Islamic intellectual traditions, which value original authorship, collective responsibility, and moral accountability. These values are often threatened in digital environments due to decentralized authorship and automated intellectual production. As Yang contended, the entrenchment of AI into knowledge systems pushes us to reconsider the ethics of contribution, authorship, and epistemic legitimacy (518–34). In Morocco, this reconsideration necessitates taking shape in a culturally appropriate manner that balances openness to innovation and tradition.

While the risks are evident, the potential to use generative AI to strengthen academic integrity, rather than undermine it, is equally enticing. When regulated appropriately, these technologies can facilitate a more inclusive education, better multilingual accessibility, enhanced plagiarism detection, and even tailor-made feedback for student improvement. However, realizing this vision requires not just infrastructure, but regulation (ethical codes, institutional policies, and pedagogically mediated adaptiveness) that is contextualized with respect to global best practices and local cultural realities.

This article examines the ethical and regulatory challenges generative AI brings to higher education in Morocco and how higher education institutions can protect academic integrity while utilizing technological possibilities. The paper draws on a mix of international policy analysis, policies, and national education strategies, along with qualitative contributions from Moroccan universities to look at both the threats and opportunities of generative AI, with respect to assessment practices, research output, and faculty-student relationships. Through a grounded and comparative lens, the aim is to consider how context-appropriate AI governance models may be developed that are specific to Morocco's linguistic, institutional, and cultural particularities in order to promote a more inclusive, accountable, and ethically resilient educational context—a context in which innovation is possible, but the values of higher learning are not sacrificed.

Literature Review

This section develops a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the ethical and regulatory dimensions of generative AI in Moroccan higher education. The framework integrates global AI ethics principles with local cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts to create what we term a “Glocal AI Ethics” approach.

Theoretical Foundations

Glocalization Theory: Through the concept of “glocalization,” Roland Robertson captures the dialectical processes by which global forces and local practices are mutually reshaped (28). In the realm of AI ethics, glocalization clarifies why frameworks proposed by multilateral bodies become meaningful only when they are adapted into local norms. Arjun Appadurai’s work on ethnoscapes and ideoscapes further qualifies this observation, detailing how the flows of technology intermingle with cultural imaginary in order to produce hybrid arrangements (Appadurai33-7). Moroccan universities represent a hybridization of sorts, located at a geopolitical crossroads and operating in four working languages.

Critical Data Studies: A second thread foregrounds power asymmetries that are built into data infrastructures. Crawford’s Atlas of AI reveals the environmental, labor, and epistemic extractions hidden behind “frictionless” platforms. Williamson and Piattoeva extend this

critique to schooling, pointing out that routine algorithmic surveillance normalizes forms of data capture that erode trust at the center of authentic learning (60-65). For Morocco, where teacher-student relations are characteristically dialogic, these insights foreshadow a struggle between dashboards for analytics imported from other contexts and pedagogies deemed valuable within local contexts.

Contextual Integrity Theory: Privacy is not a universal commodity. In [her] privacy framework, Helen Nissenbaum claims that normative rules governing flow are relative to context, and are fully maintained only when information flows conform to the implicit rules of a given context (119-20). Given the blending of classroom, community, and family contexts on Moroccan campuses, ensuring contextual integrity in the machine learning that occurs with generative AI systems requires acute attention to how they reconfigure these flows as well. An example of this is when a chatbot trained on a global dataset processes a student dialect of Amazigh. In summary, the three traditions come together around the claim that ethical AI governance has to be principled and place-based, which is what informs the framework detailed below.

The Glocal AI Ethics Framework: Three Dimensions

Our framework operationalizes glocal ethics in three interconnected dimensions—pedagogical, ethical, and regulatory—that are each examined from both global and local perspectives.

Pedagogical dimension: Luckin et al. demonstrate that AI tutors can offer individualized pacing and feedback (Luckin et al. 17). However, empirical classroom research from North Africa reveals language-mismatch barriers. For example, the order of magnitude for large language models, whether fine-tuned on English or Arabic versions, is one. Amazigh is virtually useless for training purposes. Engaging with early adopters does not mediate Arabic media, and Arabic media privilege their decisions about online education. Bouzidi (verification pending) observed faculty completely excluded Arabic by requiring students to complete high-stakes French writing tasks so they could use more advanced AI writing assistants, which does nothing to dismantle or tacitly accept harmful linguistic hegemony actively.

Ethical dimension: Universalist charters, such as UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of AI or the OECD's AI Principles, invoke abstract values like beneficence and justice. Stakeholders in Morocco add to this that Islamic bioethics develops the way in which the notion of amanah, or trust, links to data stewardship, whereby data is viewed as a deposit, meaning that institutions must treat student data as sacred (i.e., subject to amanah). A post-colonial critique would caution us against delegating significant knowledge work to global tech multinationals; feminist scholarship, meanwhile, highlights the possibility of algorithmically erasing gendered minority voices. El-Badawy and Hashem suggest the adoption of a MENA-specific values-based model, which integrates local priorities into curricula and accreditation standards (34-6).

Regulatory dimension: The layering-governance approach discussed by Gasser and Almeida provides a "context layer" that allows global norms to be "bound to reality" in the sector (60). Morocco's draft National AI Strategy outlines this structure, suggesting the establishment of a national ethics committee to collaborate with universities in developing guidelines for pilot testing before they are codified through regulation. UNESCO (30) encourages policymakers to map their legal regimes against its recommendations, while the OECD (10-11) encourages co-creation with local educators to devise regulations and guides to safeguard cultural contexts.

Dynamic Processes: Adaptation, Resistance, Innovation

Adaptation: Universities are translating global AI toolkits into local knowledge systems. Using a university career advisory service as an example, Mohammed VI Polytechnic (UM6P) retrofitted an Arabic-first chatbot by building its dialogue system using labour-market terminology specific to Morocco. Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, on the other hand, developed a bilingual glossary plug-in that allows for the switching of the ChatGPT prompts from standard Arabic script to French script, enabling first-year students to have an easier entry into the platform.

Resistance: Faculty unions and student groups have combined to resist algorithmic monitoring platforms, portraying them as imports of surveillance that diminish trust. Such resistance is a good example of Williamson's dialectic: this is not Luddite refusal, but a renegotiation that helps set boundary conditions on acceptable AI use, e.g., proctoring webcams are refused, while AI-assisted quizzes are permitted.

Innovation: Local start-ups, such as MorocCode, are fine-tuning transformer models on Moroccan-Arabic social media corpora, while hackathons are producing prototype Amazigh OCR tools. Both instances are contributing to global open-source ecosystems, tracing back to the knowledge flows of Moroccans, demonstrating both external and internal knowledge flows, and expanding glocalization beyond receiving to contributing.

Theoretical Contribution and Application

The review of literature clarifies three cumulative insights. First, although universal principles are limits of reference, they only wield normative power when they are rendered through contextualized expressions. Secondly, glocal processes are simultaneous: Moroccan agents are not just subject to AI ethics but also co-creators of the meaning of AI ethics. Finally, multilingualism is not merely a technical variable, but an ethical variable that intersects epistemic justice and data colonialism concerns.

By focusing on the cultural and historical context, it explains how certain media messages resonate as "common sense" and become normalized among audiences (Kuckartz 62). This approach's flexibility allows researchers to consider multiple interpretations, providing a nuanced understanding of framing strategies and their broader social and political impact (Altheide 291). Overall, textual analysis offers valuable insights into how media outlets construct narratives that influence public opinion and policy debates.

The study employs archival research to analyze news narratives about two key migration events: the 2021 Ceuta border crisis (17-26 May) and the 2023 migration wave (1-10 February), selecting relevant articles from each period. The identification of media frames was carried out through an inductive, interpretive approach typical of qualitative textual analysis. One researcher conducted close readings of the selected articles, identifying patterns in language, emphasis, and narrative structure. Frames were not drawn from a pre-established coding scheme but emerged organically based on their frequency, contextual relevance, and capacity to reflect shifts in media.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research approach grounded in a multi-source analytical framework to examine the ethical and regulatory dimensions of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in Moroccan higher education. The methodological design aligns with the exploratory

nature of the research questions, which seek to understand institutional practices, stakeholder perceptions, and normative gaps rather than quantify usage patterns or performance metrics.

Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach was selected for three primary reasons: (1) the emergent nature of generative AI in Moroccan higher education requires exploratory investigation before quantitative measurement; (2) the complex interplay between technology, ethics, and cultural context demands rich descriptive data; and (3) the need to triangulate between policy documents, stakeholder experiences, and international frameworks necessitates methodological flexibility.

Data Sources and Collection Methods

The research draws upon three primary sources of data. First, policy document analysis involved a systematic review of national strategies and institutional policies, including national-level documents such as Digital Morocco 2025, Vision Stratégique de la Réforme de l'Éducation 2015–2030, and digital governance reports from the Ministry of Higher Education; institutional-level policy documents from Mohammed V University, ENSA Kenitra, and Université Mohammed VI Polytechnique (UM6P); and international frameworks such as the UNESCO AI Ethics Framework, OECD AI Policy Guidelines, and European Commission AI Act provisions relevant to education. Documents were selected based on their relevance to digital transformation in education, explicit mention of AI governance, and publication between 2015 and 2025. The analysis focused on identifying regulatory approaches, ethical considerations, and implementation gaps.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen key stakeholders, including ten faculty members from diverse disciplines (computer science, education, philosophy, linguistics), three digital learning administrators responsible for technology integration, and two Ministry of Higher Education representatives involved in digital policy. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across geographic diversity (universities in Rabat, Casablanca, Kenitra, and Marrakech), institutional types (public and private universities), and varying levels of experience with AI implementation. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted in the participant's preferred language (Arabic, French, or English). The interview protocol addressed four key areas: awareness and understanding of generative AI tools, institutional responses, ethical concerns, and culture-specific values related to AI in education.

Third, a literature review was conducted through a systematic search of scholarly literature on AI ethics in education using databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar, as well as Arabic-language databases Al Manhal and Dar Al Mandumah, and French-language databases Cairn.info and Persée. Search terms included combinations of "artificial intelligence," "generative AI," "higher education," "ethics," "regulation," "Morocco," "North Africa," and "Global South." The inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed publications from 2016 to 2025, relevance to educational contexts, and a substantive discussion of ethical or regulatory dimensions.

Analytical Framework and Data Analysis

The research draws upon three primary sources of data. First, a systematic analysis of policy documents was undertaken at the national, institutional, and international levels. This included Digital Morocco 2025, Vision Stratégique de la Réforme de l'Éducation 2015–2030, and digital governance reports from the Ministry of Higher Education. Institutional sources were drawn from Mohammed V University, ENSA Kenitra, and Université Mohammed VI Polytechnique (UM6P). Internationally, the review considered the UNESCO AI Ethics Framework, the OECD AI Policy Guidelines, and relevant provisions from the European Commission's AI Act. Documents were selected based on their relevance to digital transformation in education, explicit references to AI governance, and publication dates between 2015 and 2025. The analysis focused on identifying regulatory approaches, ethical considerations, and existing implementation gaps.

Second, the study incorporated semi-structured interviews with fifteen key stakeholders. These included ten faculty members across various disciplines, such as computer science, education, philosophy, and linguistics; three digital learning administrators responsible for integrating institutional technology; and two representatives from the Ministry of Higher Education engaged in digital policy-making. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity across geographic locations, including Rabat, Casablanca, Kenitra, and Marrakech, as well as institutional types (public and private universities) and degrees of AI implementation experience. Interviews, conducted in the participant's preferred language (Arabic, French, or English), lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and addressed four core themes: awareness and understanding of generative AI tools, institutional responses, ethical concerns, and culturally specific values linked to AI in education.

Third, the study conducted a systematic review of scholarly literature related to AI ethics in education. Databases consulted included Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar, alongside Arabic-language repositories such as Al Manhal and Dar Al Mandumah, as well as French-language platforms like Cairn.info and Persée. Search terms combined keywords including "artificial intelligence," "generative AI," "higher education," "ethics," "regulation," "Morocco," "North Africa," and "Global South." Peer-reviewed publications published between 2016 and 2025 were selected based on relevance to educational contexts and substantive treatment of ethical or regulatory issues.

Case Study Selection

The research also incorporated three institutional case studies selected to reflect diverse approaches to AI integration within Moroccan higher education. Mohammed V University in Rabat was chosen as the country's oldest and largest public university, characterized by a traditional governance structure and moderate engagement in digital transformation initiatives. ENSA Kenitra was included as a specialized engineering institution that demonstrates strong technical capacity yet lacks formal AI governance frameworks. The third institution, Université Mohammed VI Polytechnique (UM6P), represents a recently established private university distinguished by its substantial investment in AI research and its explicit commitment to digital innovation. These institutions were selected based on three key criteria: documented involvement in digital transformation, variation in institutional type, size, and governance model, and practical accessibility for research.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to ethical guidelines for educational research, with approval from the institutional review board at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University. Participants provided informed consent, and data were anonymized to protect confidentiality. Particular attention was paid to cultural sensitivity in interview protocols and analysis, acknowledging the multilingual and multicultural context of Moroccan higher education.

Methodological Limitations

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small interview sample restricts the generalizability of the findings beyond the institutions examined. Second, there is a potential for self-selection bias, as participants may have been more likely to volunteer if they already held an interest in AI ethics. Third, given the rapid pace of development in generative AI technologies, some of the insights presented here may have limited temporal validity. Fourth, despite deliberate efforts to include Arabic and French sources, language barriers may have constrained the comprehensiveness of the literature review. Nonetheless, the triangulation of diverse data sources and the adoption of a context-sensitive analytical framework contribute to a robust foundation for examining the ethical and regulatory dimensions of generative AI in Moroccan higher education.

Results

The application of generative AI in Moroccan higher education is currently evolving in a fragmented and rapidly changing context. The data from the document analysis and stakeholder interviews reflect a mixture of optimism, uncertainty, and considerable gaps in institutional readiness and regulatory clarity. This section highlights key themes that emerged from the data, situating them within the broader international debates on ethics, governance, and innovation in education.

Awareness and Perceptions of Generative AI

In the post-2023 phase, across the institutions examined, an emerging awareness of generative AI tools is evident among both faculty and administrators. Interviewees discussed the frequent use of tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quillbot by students for language correcting, research support, and drafting assignments. Faculty also noted that these tools present potential to enable student learning, especially in multilingual classrooms where they understand students struggle with academic writing in Arabic, French, or English.

However, alongside awareness, there was confusion and inconsistent perceptions regarding the legitimacy of AI-supported outputs. Some instructors considered the use of AI to be “digital assistance,” while others viewed it as academic misrepresentation, particularly when students failed to disclose that their assignments relied on generative text tools. The lack of institutional policies or guidelines was often cited as a source of confusion and mistrust.

These findings are reflective of Selwyn’s and Holmes’ documentation of situations where unclear policy conditions commonly exacerbate ethical problems and pedagogical disjunctions, leading to fragmented institutional responses to AI adoption.

Institutional Readiness and Regulatory Gaps

Despite Morocco having national strategies for digital transformation, none of the universities studied had policies regarding the ethical or pedagogical use of generative AI. University codes of conduct featured statements about academic honesty in general terms, but did not include policy details regarding AI-authored work, content attribution, or content disclosure. Only one institution (UM6P) was found to be developing internal discussions regarding the design of AI policy, and this was at an early stage.

In interviews, many institutional stakeholders expressed discomfort with the inevitable pace of AI change and the slow pace of academic regulation. Several interviewees commented that coherent institutional action to advance generative AI use in higher education would be severely hindered by the lack of national guidelines provided by the Ministry of Higher Education.

This regulatory void mirrors global patterns discussed by Fjeld et al., who argue that, despite global support for the adoption of ethical principles and the endorsement of ethical principles by many institutions, organizationally weak implementation exists at the institutional level. In Morocco's case, issues of regulation are further compounded by the wider resource disparities between urban infrastructures to finance education and those attempting to support rural or poorly financed institutions.

As summarized in Table 1, Institutional preparedness is found across a continuum. It demonstrates, the private UM6P is well on its way to having a dedicated AI-governance framework, ENSA Kenitra is working on exploratory pilot projects, while Mohammed V University operates in a largely ad-hoc way. The difference across the "AI Policy Status," "Faculty Training," and "Implementation Notes" demonstrates that the gap between policy and practice widens as one moves from better-resourced to resource-constrained institutions.

Table 1: Institutional Readiness for Generative AI Integration in Moroccan HEIs

University	AI Policy Status	Faculty Training	Implementation Notes
Mohammed V University	None	Limited	Ad-hoc use by faculty without centralized guidance
ENSA Kenitra	Draft Stage	Developing	Pilot projects underway in STEM departments
Université Mohammed VI Polytechnique (UM6P)	In Development	Moderate	Internal working group exploring governance frameworks

Ethical Challenges: Integrity, Authorship, and Surveillance

Three clear ethical issues emerged from the interviews: breaches of academic integrity, ambiguity over authorship, and unjustified use of monitoring technologies. Faculty reported

cases where students submitted work that was clearly AI-authored content, yet quite impossible to discern using conventional detection tools as plagiarized content.

Stakeholders coalesce around three intertwined risks. Table 2 distills their concerns: undetectable plagiarism threatens academic integrity, ambiguous contributions cloud authorship, and AI-enabled proctoring raises privacy concerns. The representative quotes underscore a shared perception of opacity—faculty and students alike "feel they are being watched without consent," signaling an urgent need for transparent disclosure protocols.

Table 2: **Key Ethical Concerns Raised by Stakeholders**

Ethical Concern	Description	Representative Quote
Academic Integrity	Use of AI for undetectable plagiarism	Use of AI for undetectable plagiarism
Authorship Ambiguity	Unclear contribution of AI in collaborative work	"It's hard to know who wrote what when AI tools are involved."
Surveillance Risks	AI-based proctoring raises privacy concerns	"Students feel they are being watched without consent."

This validates international findings that generative AI circumvents conventional plagiarism tools by creating "original" content that maintains logical structure but does not directly copy from other works (Mittelstadt et al. 610).

The concern over authorship is also connected to collaborative projects, where it is deemed acceptable to utilize AI tools in preparatory literature reviews or at the beginning stages of drafting a methodology, with no indication that AI was used. The result is an increasing tension surrounding attributions of credit, especially in multilingual academic environments that impact access to a quality output from AI usage, depending on the languages employed.

Some institutions have also been examining the use of monitoring software enhanced by AI for online assessments, raising concerns among stakeholders regarding privacy, autonomy, and trust among students. These shifts correspond with Williamson and Piattoeva, who reported that algorithmic surveillance of students in education perpetuates accepted and standard data capture while disrupting the relational trust that underlies authentic learning environments (60-5).

Local Values, Cultural Alignment, and Linguistic Justice

One of the most distinctive findings in the Moroccan context is the intersection between generative AI and cultural-linguistic norms. Stakeholders expressed concerns that global AI platforms are not designed with Moroccan cultural references, nor do they support equitable multilingual access. Students working in Arabic or French reported less reliable AI-generated content, echoing findings by Zouhir and Noble on the epistemic bias of dominant AI models.

Furthermore, interviewees emphasized the importance of embedding AI ethics in local values, such as Islamic ethical traditions, community-based learning, and the moral centrality of authorship. These perspectives highlight the limitations of universalist ethics frameworks and point to the importance of context-specific regulatory approaches, as advocated by Gasser, Almeida, El-Badawy, and Hashem (34-6).

Discussion

Towards Glocal Regulation

The overall takeaway from the study is that to enable generative artificial intelligence (AI) in Moroccan higher education, a regulatory approach is needed that integrates global best practices with the local context within which the institutions operate. It was consistently noted by component stakeholders that national policy coordination at the local level, faculty training, and ethical education as part of the curriculum were necessary.

While international guidelines, such as those provided by UNESCO (30) and the OECD (10-11), can serve as valuable reference points, they must be interpreted within the context of local Moroccan values, linguistic complexity, and the diversity of Moroccan institutions in which they are situated. Without such a process of reinterpretation and realignment, the benefits of generative AI will be unevenly distributed among those who teach and learn, with ethical dereliction and academic disorientation becoming the norm.

Conclusion

This research has examined the ethical and regulatory implications of generative artificial intelligence (AI) for Moroccan higher education, utilizing qualitative data, national strategies, institutional case studies, and international comparisons. As generative AI becomes increasingly prevalent in academic work—from content creation to research assistance and personalized learning—it begins to challenge the fundamental principles of the academic ecosystem, i.e., originality, authorship, and "trust." The challenges of establishing these principles are exacerbated in emerging pragmatic digital environments, such as Morocco, where regulatory structures, pedagogical frameworks, and digital literacy systems are still in the process of maturation.

The research indicates several notable findings. First, the level of awareness regarding generative AI is rapidly increasing among faculty, students, and administrators, with effective institutional policies still lacking in place. The absence of a formal policy context resulted in uncertainty about practice (e.g., assessment, authorship, acceptable use). Second, the Moroccan institutions show diversity in their readiness and willingness to engage with generative AI. Some universities, for example, are actively exploring frameworks for ethical use and faculty training on generative AI; other universities appear to be at the beginning stages of developing digital policies. Third, the ethical challenges of generative AI (e.g., violations of academic integrity, creation of culturally inappropriate content) are compounded by the multilingual and multicultural realities of higher education in Morocco. The prevalence of dominant English language AI tools can also impact the participation of non-English-speaking academics in research and reinforce a language hierarchy.

The results suggest that a "glocal" regulatory framework is required, that is aware of international principles of AI ethics while being responsive to Morocco's educational, linguistic, and cultural identity. It will require national policy leadership and institutional capacity building

with an integrated faculty development approach. AI governance must also be inclusive, participatory, and anticipatory to both the changing technologies and academic practices.

The study also presents several limitations. Since the study followed a qualitative research design with rich data, its generalizability is limited beyond the context of the institutions and perspectives sampled. The qualitative methodology included a small, though purposively sampled, number of interviews. Additionally, the research focuses on higher education and does not include the integration of AI in educational systems (e.g., secondary schools, vocational schools, etc.). Finally, due to the rapid pace of development, some platforms and institutional responses discussed may face challenges sooner than anticipated.

Future research can expand the empirical base of data through multi-institutional surveys, longitudinal studies, and emerging student-focused perspectives on the integration of generative AI. Future studies should also consider roles for AI curriculum co-design and develop cross-border research collaborations, as well as consider the development of Arabic and Amazigh-compatible AI. Comparative studies with other North African or Global South countries may also deepen understanding about how varied sociopolitical contexts mediate the ethics and governance of AI in education.

Ultimately, securing the integrity of education in the era of generative AI will require a dynamic, collaborative, and principled response. Moroccan higher education institutions, policy-makers, and researchers stand in a unique position not only to adapt to global innovations but to be leaders in creating inclusive and equitable digital futures.

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Language Learning Through Collaboration: A Reflective Transcontinental Study on Students' Experiences with Cooperative Projects

Abderrazak Zaafour
Lecturer and Teacher Trainer, University Abdelmalek Essaâdi, ENS, Tetouan, Morocco

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Zaafour Abderrazak is an English language professor at ENS, Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Tetouan, Morocco. He holds a PhD from the 'International PhD School,' University of Almeria, Spain, Faculty of Education Sciences, Department of English Studies. He specializes in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). His line of research centers around Didactics and Educational Innovation for an Inclusive Society.

a.zaafour@uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6369-5271

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Abderrazak Zaafour
Lecturer and Teacher Trainer, University Abdelmalek Essaâdi, ENS, Tetouan, Morocco

ABSTRACT

This study explores Cooperative Project-Based Learning's (CPBL) beneficial impacts on students' motivation, confidence, and efficiency in language learning in comparison to traditional learning methods. While the latter is based on a teacher-centered approach, modern pedagogies have shifted to different procedures emphasizing student agency by employing methodologies rooted in learner autonomy and responsibility. CPBL is a collaborative learning and project-based task combination, promoting active learning and real-world language application. Given that, the literature reveals a notable gap in addressing students' perspectives on CPBL. This study was grounded in data from an online survey, gathering responses from 40 language learners and educators from Morocco, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Philippines. The results demonstrated that this methodology is widely favored by both student and teacher cohorts, since most respondents (73.7%) affirmed that engaging in language learning through CPBL cultivates greater cognitive engagement and conceptual depth than standard methods, due to its effectiveness in strengthening students' confidence when transferring learned concepts to everyday contexts. Moreover, participants in this questionnaire had positive feedback concerning their experience with CPBL teamwork tasks. However, a remarkable portion of the participants (35 %) had a neutral stance about the method's ability to boost their confidence and motivation. Highlighting the importance of involving students in language classes that implement the CPBL methodology, the study findings contribute to the growing body of literature on collaborative learning, providing practical implications for implementing student-centered pedagogies.

KEYWORDS

Cooperative project-based learning (CPBL)

Traditional methods

Language learning through CPBL

Students' perspective on CPBL

Introduction

Amid the wide array of contemporary educational methodologies, PBL has become widely recognized as a pioneer of pedagogical approaches owing to the favorable outcomes it produces for students' critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and attentive participation by including them in perceptually tangible projects, which necessitate the implementation of different skills, hence making the learning process entertaining and meaningful. Parallelly, collaborative learning tackles the aspect of socializing in a learning environment and its significance, accentuating that knowledge is harnessed through conversations and teamwork.

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The integration and the combination of both collaborative learning and project-based learning inside the English classrooms have shown incrementally positive results (Putimasurai et al. 124).

Cooperative learning has evolved into a paradigm-shifting methodology in the field of language education, constructing active student-centered environments that improve linguistic competence, performance, and interpersonal skills (Li 2). Cooperative project Based Learning (CPBL), the approach that combines both cooperative and project or problem-based learning principles, provides a structured framework through which students collaborate in groups to complete authentic language tasks, which in return helps with fostering critical thinking, creativity, and effective communication (Mohd-Yusof et al. 13). By engaging through CPBL, students not only improve and refine their language abilities but also gain important 21st-century skills like cooperation, leadership, and problem solving, all of which are necessary for academic and professional success (Othman and Idrus 57). This study analyzes students' perceptions and experiences with CPBL in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms to understand how collaborative dynamics impact language learning outcomes and personal growth.

Language learning through traditional methods has remained the norm since the beginning of formal education. Teachers have been the main element in the classroom, controlling the flow of information by being the central medium through which students perceive and learn fundamental core notions. Instructors are the only ones responsible for explaining the concepts that concern grammar, lexicon, syntax, and semantics. Meanwhile, students in this context play a passive role limited to absorbing and memorizing information as it is and returning it on the day of the exam. With enough modernization, foreign language learning has developed and experienced a significant shift; it has become more student-centered rather than teacher-centered, focusing on the social aspect of learning (Jacobs and Farrell 4).

This led to the introduction of a new way of learning called cooperative project-based learning, which aims to equip learners with the necessary hard and soft skills crucial for achieving and complying with the expectations of the modern academic and workforce standards. Furthermore, it is a substitution for conventional pedagogical methods, combining two complementary and mutually reinforcing approaches, both directed toward a unified objective: boosting learner engagement in cooperative project development within the context of language learning (Zaafour and Salaberri-Ramiro 1).

While there is a shortage of studies conducted by Moroccan researchers concerning higher education students' perceptions regarding the effect of CPBL on their English language learning, this present paper offers a discussion of CPBL as an approach to language teaching and learning that can promote students' susceptibility to learn. It also highlights students' perceptions and experiences concerning this method. Asserting the idea that students in general have convenient access to materials and resources that are essential to producing successful projects. Indeed, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of CPBL on students' motivational levels to achieve success in language learning?
2. To what extent does the implementation of CPBL in language learning boost students' confidence through the utilization of learned concepts in contextually relevant situations, including formal evaluations and scholarly dialogues?
3. Is CPBL a more effective approach than traditional methods for enhancing language learning?
4. What are students' perceptions of the implementation of CPBL in English language education?

Literature Review

Cooperative Project-Based Learning (CPBL) is a modern instructional method that allows students to use the language while working on creative and innovative projects like simulating and replicating real-life scenarios, gamifying the classroom and praising the best answers or practices, creating videos or podcasts, project presentations or posters, among many other creative ways of learning, where the students are the central agents of their learning. While educators are the mentors who guide and ensure that their students are actively engaging with the material while fostering effective learning through dynamic and interest-driven instructional strategies, rather than memorizing abstract aspects of the language, such as grammar and vocabulary. These strategies guarantee that the students will achieve optimum learning outcomes (Thomas 4). The substantial body of literature that has been conducted on the effects of CPBL on language learning and on the students' psyche and openness to such methods, indicated that this approach positively influences their creativity, level of motivation, and enhanced favorable portrayal of oneself. Given that, the majority of participants who engage through CPBL find this approach highly effective. Moreover, project-based learning positively impacts learners' collaborative skills, communication, innovation, and problem-solving skills (Andriyani and Anam 51). Additionally, from the students' perception, PBL proved to be crucial in improving enthusiasm, confidence, self-directed learning, and collaborative learning skills.

Similarly, from the teachers' perspective, PBL fosters motivation to teach and increases satisfaction (Putri et al. 1151). CPBL proved to be not only efficient in reformulating and enhancing students' mental capabilities and boosting positive emotions but also helped in refining vital academic skills crucial for the learners' academic and workplace journey. Dewi illustrates that when learners work on projects, they are engaged in purposeful, focused communication in a natural context (341–42). Moreover, the act of participating in relevant activities emboldens the learners to use EFL language skills authentically. Among the wide range of communicative methods, public speeches and spoken reports serve as effective means for advancing students' communicative and speaking proficiency. Nevertheless, preparing such activities requires that students craft a meticulously organized speech and present on a topic that best reflects their individual interests. Brooks and Wilson demonstrate that an oral presentation is beneficial for learners as it provides them with the opportunities to use their second language (L2) to communicate with others in a natural way (199). When the students stand in front of their classmates and speak, they practice and refine their articulatory abilities of pronouncing words and formulating sentences. It is an ideal preparation for their authentic speaking (Thornbury 91).

In this vein, this study seeks to explore how CPBL helps in the process of learning EFL. Beyond that, it seeks to clarify the theoretical foundation of CPBL and how it can function as an innovative approach that fosters inclusivity in English language classrooms. Additionally, the present study aims to illustrate how CPBL involves learners with the target language in a meaningful and creative way. "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb 38). Kolb emphasizes in his book, *Experiential learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, that learning is a process that must be achieved through experience. CPBL helps language learning by actually using the language naturally, in real-life situations while working on projects, instead of just passively receiving rules and instructions. In CPBL, students have a diverse range of opportunities to act, speak, write, and understand the language in real-life scenarios. Additionally, it helps enhance teamwork, creativity, and confidence (Richards and Rodgers 207; Johnson and Johnson 68). Thus, this study intended to cover the effects and impact of CPBL on learners' motivation,

confidence, and general efficacy in language learning. Moreover, it aimed at exploring learners' opinions on the effectiveness of project-based learning. The findings of this research could provide a deeper understanding of students' perspectives and their stance on this pedagogical approach.

Theoretical Foundations of CPBL

CPBL is deeply grounded in constructivist and sociocultural learning theories. Vygotsky, in his book *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, states that students effectively develop their intellectual capacities through social interactions (86). He discusses the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), in which students' skills are boosted while learning through guidance from their educators. In CPBL, students work in groups, helping their peers and learning a language together through interaction. Project-based learning is likewise endorsed by prominent theorists, including Piaget, who maintains that knowledge is constructed through active participation and critical reflection on learning experiences (11,12; 153,154). CPBL is described as a process where students learn by creating and actively engaging in language tasks; this could occur in different learning styles. In cooperative learning, students work in groups and assist each other; every student plays a vital role that contributes to the group work's success. In CPBL, students use the language to communicate ideas, solve problems, and give feedback to each other (Johnson and Johnson 45). Moreover, through this approach, students learn by working on a project, which is most probably built on a problematic question or situation. While tackling projects, students use multiple high-order abilities, which involve planning, researching, analyzing, creating, and presenting the culminating output of their project-based learning task. CPBL combines individual as well as cooperative teamwork to find solutions to different tasks or assignments, which results in creating an interactive way to learn.

Benefits and Challenges of CPBL in Language Learning

Guided by these theoretical frameworks, studies indicate that CPBL improves several aspects of language learning. Working in groups and exchanging ideas often helps students develop their four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing). Additionally, the implementation of projects promotes the development of a broad spectrum of language subskills, including vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, sociolinguistic and strategic competence, and both cognitive and metacognitive abilities, while also nurturing a broad set of critical life skills, among others. Hence, supporting more in-depth learning and information retention. Evenddy, Gailea, and Syafrizal claim that CPBL raises motivation and student autonomy by boosting their sense of commitment, employing ownership of their learning journey, and it also strengthens their soft skills, such as goal-setting, logic-based decision making, and adequate time management, allowing them to become active contributors to their own educational journey, by linking together the theoretical and practical aspects of language learning (460–461). Research on PBL indicates that students acquainted with these methods achieve higher academic results, exceeding their peers in standardized tests as a result of the profound understanding improved by this method (Bhat and Dar 254).

While CPBL offers many advantages, it also comes with certain challenges in language classrooms. A common issue is unequal individual participation in group work, where some students take the lead or conduct the majority of the work, leaving the others unable to contribute to the tasks assigned, leading to an imbalance in group work (Li 2). Additionally, CPBL can be demanding in terms of time and may clash with rigid curricula or exam-heavy systems. In addition to these fundamental problems, recent studies pointed to other, often

disregarded, collaboration challenges found in classrooms using the CPBL method. One of which is priority conflict within students' groups, where students can have different motivations or different focuses, which eventually leads to contrasting goals and uneven task distribution (Hussein 9-12). Moreover, Hussein mentioned that scheduling issues also emerge in CPBL environments, where some students find it difficult to arrange meetings between them or even balance CPBL assignments with other academic tasks (9). Educators must be ready to handle group interactions, offer support, and ensure reasonable evaluation for every student. As Mouni points out, although CPBL supports and encourages deeper learning, its success depends on thoughtful preparation, proper teacher training, and strong institutional assistance to work effectively (93; 98,99).

Existing Research on CPBL in a Language Learning Context

As studies showed, cooperative project-based learning is an impactful field of research. The choice of CPBL as a research topic is a testament that scholars have engaged in thoughtful and in-depth studies. Among them, El Moudden and Lamkhantar, in their study, indicated that the majority of participants (74%) think that project work provides a high chance of developing their students' speaking and listening skills. As mentioned in the findings, 36% have also indicated that reading comprehension, vocabulary, and research writing skills have significantly enhanced due to carrying out projects at university (437).

Furthermore, their study also covered the educators' perspectives on incorporating CPBL in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and how factors like age can influence it. In a qualitative study by Haddad, interviews were conducted with twelve teachers from a magnet school to study their perspective regarding project-based learning (PBL). The results showed that while educators with different experience levels recognized its benefits, the younger and less experienced teachers were likely to implement it. These educators have found that PBL corresponds with their teaching philosophies and are more flexible in meeting its requirements (52,54;63,64). On the other hand, more experienced teachers pointed out the obstacles they have found while implementing PBL, such as the extensive planning time needed and the administrative support it requires (Haddad 51-60).

This research aims to explain mainly the perspectives of students of EFL on cooperative project-based learning (CPBL). Additionally, the research aims to know the level EFL teachers implement CPBL in their classrooms, and the core challenges preventing its use, as well as highlighting the importance of guidance while embracing the approach. Two university professors and twelve educators graduated from the Moroccan Regional Center for Education and Training Professions (CRMEF) participated in the online questionnaire that included their definition of CPBL, their experience with it, the benefits they gained, and the obstacles they faced when they implemented it. Both the research was informative and impactful in explaining the importance of the use of CPBL for EFL practitioners. On the other hand, research highlights students' experiences, and their preferences regarding the approach, how they feel about it, or even the benefits as well as the drawbacks they face while working cooperatively on their authentic projects.

Methodology

The study employed quantitative research design, targeting university professors and students serving as the principal respondents. A well-structured survey was designed to examine how

participants from varied cultural and educational contexts perceive the effectiveness of CPBL as an approach to language instruction.

Participants

A total of 40 volunteering participants provided their opinions and experiences with CPBL. The survey included language students across four different countries: Morocco, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and the Philippines. Despite the participants' differences in culture, language, educational systems, age, academic level, and profession, they shared interests and experiences with cooperative project-based language learning. This diversity provided valuable insights into how this method is perceived across different backgrounds and nationalities when related to the learning and teaching of English through group work projects.

The 40 participants, who were both language professors and students from different continents, were made up of 52.5% females and 47.5% males. They were distributed based on academic levels, with 92.3% bachelor's and 7.7 % master's degree holders.

Instrument and Ethical Considerations

The survey was distributed via social media, targeting language students and professors, allowing the inclusion of participants from different countries and continents. Prior to completing the questionnaire, participants were provided with an introductory message outlining the purpose of the study and the estimated time required to complete the survey, and they were also assured that their identities would be kept confidential and anonymous. Participants had the freedom to withdraw at any point without providing a reason; that was to guarantee that ethical standards were met.

The survey was refined multiple times by experts in the field to ensure clarity, validity, and the collection of meaningful insights. The questionnaire remained open for a period of 18 days, during which participants were able to complete it at their own pace, allowing for the collection of reliable and completely subjective responses. The online participation yielded sufficient data, with all responses systematically compiled and securely stored in a secure digital database.

Data Analysis

Once the data were successfully collected, the figures were carefully analyzed. These graphs provided statistical analysis with clear percentages to identify the most common responses. This helped measure the recurring patterns in participants' experiences with CPBL. For the open-ended questions, the answers were divided into groups based on their similarities, ideas, and then studied carefully. This combination of quantitative data significantly allowed for a more in-depth understanding of how CPBL is perceived across multiple cultures, academic, as well as professional backgrounds.

Results of the Study

The following results section outlines the key results obtained from the survey data, beginning with assessing students' motivation levels when engaging in CPBL, as depicted in Figure 1, which illustrates the multiple levels of students' motivation associated with participation in CPBL.

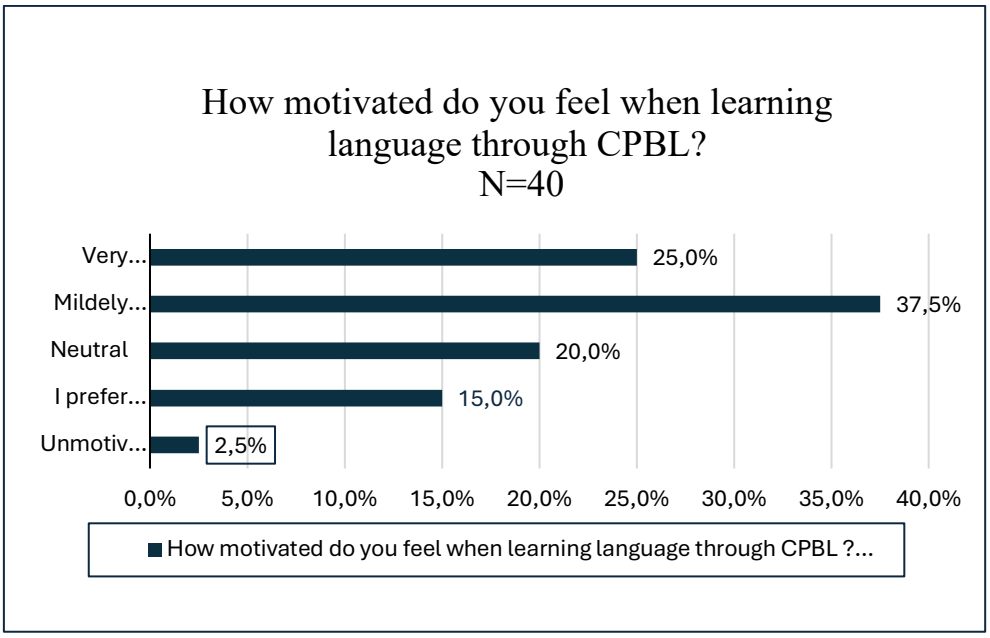


Fig. 1. Students' motivation levels with cooperative projects**.**

The multinational survey results from the 40 participants showed (Fig. 1) a varied level of motivation when engaging in cooperative projects. A quite significant portion of the survey participants (37.5%) felt mildly motivated, followed by 15% who revealed that they tend to work by themselves regarding language learning, while 20% have indicated that they have a neutral view regarding language cooperative work. Notably, (25%) feel very motivated, while a smaller proportion of respondents reported experiencing slight or complete demotivation when tasked with collaborative project assignments. The results suggest that although collaborative learning is broadly motivating for most language students across various countries, a considerable subset nonetheless favors individual modes of working.

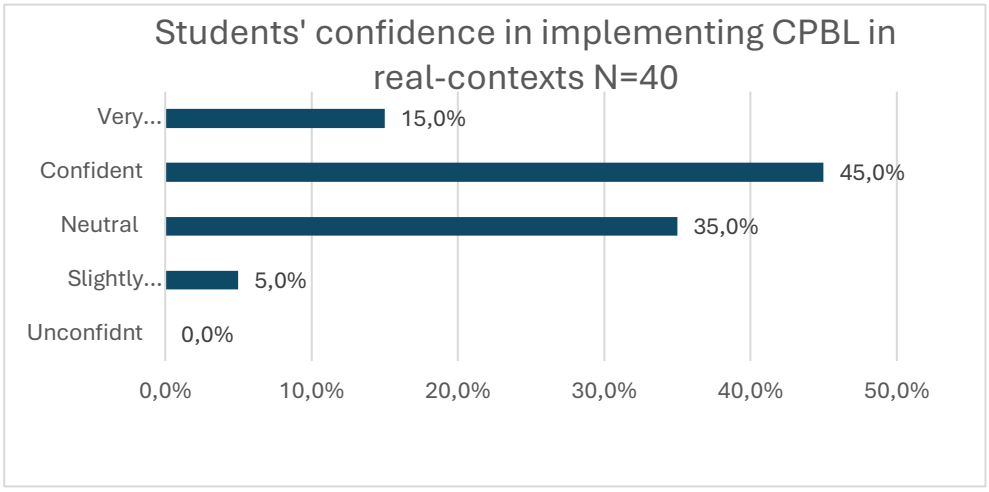


Fig. 2. The level of students' confidence in implementing CPBL skills in real-world contexts

When participants were asked to what extent they felt confident in relating the knowledge acquired through CPBL to real-life contexts, such as examinations or interactions with native or non-native speakers (Figure 2), their responses were varied, though predominantly favorable. Nearly half (45%) indicated they were confident, with 15% reporting they were very confident. In contrast, 35% remained neutral, which could indicate that they are uncertain or would like to observe how CPBL performs in practice. Very few (5%) indicated that they were slightly unsure, with no respondents expressing that they were not confident at all. These answers reflect that the majority of students are confident in using what they learn, but some might need more experience or time to fully understand how CPBL affects their real-life reactions.

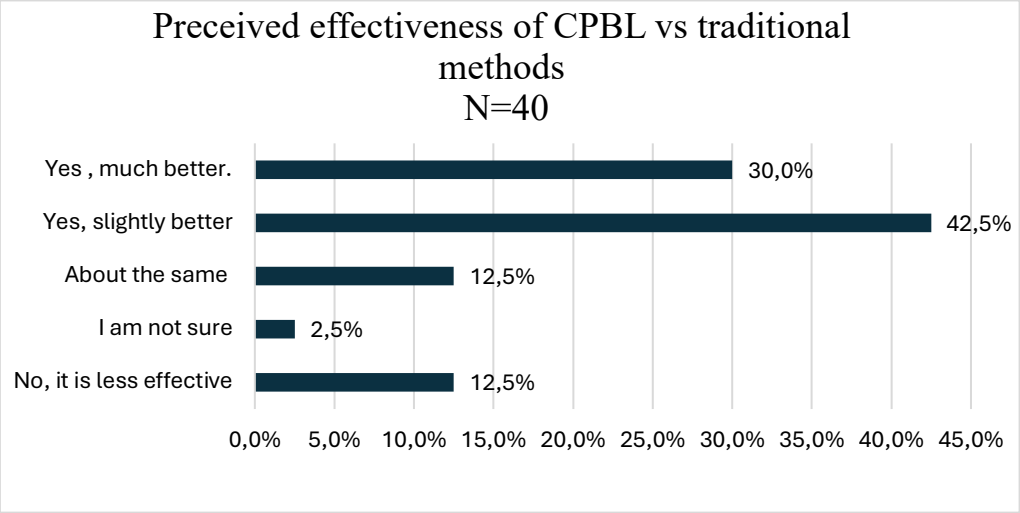


Fig. 3. How students perceive the effectiveness of cooperative projects.

When being presented with the question of whether CPBL improves course understanding more than traditional methods (Figure 3), most of the students responded positively. Out of the 40 participants, 42.5% stated that (CPBL) facilitates their understanding of the course slightly better, while 30% stated that it helped them much better, in contrast, only 12.5% felt it was less effective, and others 15% remain unsure or see no difference between CPBL and traditional methods. These findings suggested a strong tendency towards the effectiveness of CPBL, with 72.5% of the participants perceiving a clear advantage over traditional language learning methods.

Team Collaboration and Its Effect on the Perception of CPBL in Learning a Language

When students were asked directly about their collaborative experience, through questions such as, 'How effectively did you and your team collaborate during the project? Did certain members contribute more than others? Have you ever had any negative experiences working on a cooperative project, and if so, how has it influenced your language learning journey and overall perception of (CPBL)?' Their responses provided nuanced insights into the interpersonal dynamics and long-term impact of cooperative learning. Many students expressed that their groups worked efficiently together because they fairly distributed tasks, and they supported one another, which often led to successful projects and intellectually rewarding learning experiences. Some specifically mentioned that when everyone contributed, the final product was consistent

and satisfying. One participant notably described their most recent project as 'amazing,' a sentiment linked to the equitable and enthusiastic involvement of every group member.

However, collaboration was not always smooth; a recurring issue was the irregular distribution of tasks, as several students noted that some team members put in more effort than others. This imbalance, despite not being uncommon, often leads to challenges, such as stress, frustration, or even disappointment and discouragement on both how the project turned out and the learning process, especially when others relied too heavily on a single person or didn't contribute fairly. A few participants highlighted that they are unable to communicate properly within the group, which resulted in one person unintentionally or forcibly doing most of the work. For introverted students or those who are used to working individually, the implementation of cooperative group projects could be quite challenging.

Some English graduates from the Moroccan Regional Center for Education and Training Professions (CRMEF) shared past negative experiences where they felt undervalued or overwhelmed by unequal efforts. However, interestingly, many of them provide positive feedback on what they learnt from those challenging experiences, such as the importance of clearly defining roles when assigning tasks, developing communicative competence and life skills, and enhancing the sense of accountability. Based on the aforementioned points, those students sincerely expressed their belief in the value of CPBL when implemented correctly, which, as they mentioned, significantly contributed to enhancing the professional quality of their teaching experience.

Given that, a few respondents demonstrated concerns about CPBL's effectiveness for all learners. One participant pointed out that, in practice, not every student can understand, let alone explain, their assigned parts, sometimes merely reading what was generated by AI tools such as ChatGPT. This raised questions about how deeply students are engaging with the content in such projects.

In general, while experiences differed depending on the group work effectiveness, the majority of students viewed the collaborative projects as a valuable opportunity for skill development. CPBL was widely appreciated for how it implements real-world skills like teamwork, communication, responsibility, and creativity, even by those who had encountered past negative experiences along the way.

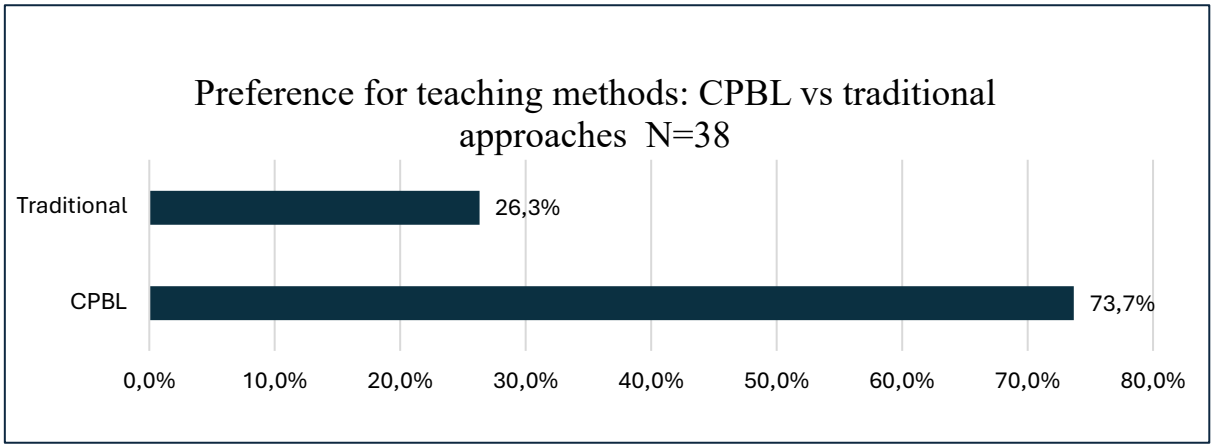


Fig. 4. Students' preference between CPBL and traditional methods.

When asked to consider the use of CPBL compared to traditional language teaching methods used in the EFL classrooms (Figure 4), a vast majority (73.7%) of students preferred CPBL

(Figure 4). Hence, the current findings indicate the students' preference and their positive perception of CPBL as a more engaging and effective approach than traditional language teaching methods. Meanwhile, 26.3% still prefer traditional language teaching methods, which could reflect preference for familiar controlled learning environments, predictability, or individual study patterns.

The participants showed a clear preference for more interactive and student-centered methods, possibly reflecting that CPBL was not only perceived as advantageous but also as a method that meets the needs and interests of students within the modern classroom environment.

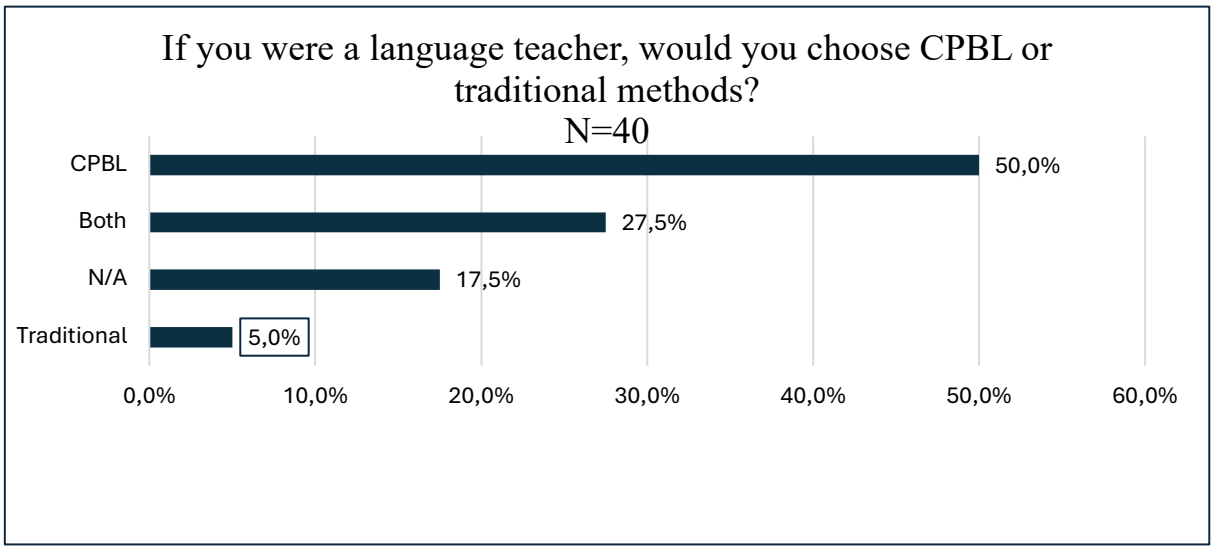


Fig. 5. Students' Comparison of CPBL and Traditional Methods in Classroom Settings.

When asked, "As a future language teacher, which approach would you embrace more in your classroom, CPBL or traditional methods, and why?" (Figure 5). Half of the responders (50%) prefer using CPBL in their future classrooms, mentioning its ability to enhance students' engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration, in addition to many other 21st-century hard and soft skills. Numerous participants believed that CPBL makes the language learning process more enjoyable, allowing students to develop fundamental soft skills like teamwork, problem-solving, and communication.

While responses called for traditional methods, claiming the ease of implementation and structured learning. Others, (27.5%) preferred the combination of both CPBL and traditional methods, identifying the value of flexibility and catering to diverse student learning needs. While 5% chose to rely on traditional methods if given the opportunity.

According to data, the reasons for preferring CPBL include its ability to encourage active learning, and how it helps with real-life application of knowledge, and helps students overcome stage fright and shyness, all of which are learning obstacles that students need to overcome. Some respondents were also grateful for how CPBL allows students to take initiative in their learning and develop self-confidence.

A few participants noted that there are a lot of factors to consider when choosing between CPBL and traditional methods, such as the course objectives, student personalities and attitudes, and educators' preferences. Overall, the findings suggest that CPBL is the go-to choice among future teachers due to its benefits in promoting student engagement and skill development; however, a mixed approach may be the most effective way to meet all students' needs.

To conclude, the results highlight that many educators were found lacking the full understanding of what CPBL is, as for the use of it, many others admitted the scarcity of CPBL

use due to the shortage of tools, lack of adequate training, and how some of them perceive the CPBL approach. Yet, in many cases, the current teaching environment does not encourage its implementation. Additionally, EFL educators reported the presence of many hurdles, for instance, the existence of large and crowded classrooms, content-heavy curriculum, insufficient time frame, inappropriate tools, and a shortage of institutional support. Indeed, EFL Moroccan educators need institutional support, effective training, and guidance to improve the use of CPBL in EFL tertiary classrooms.

Discussion

This study provides significant insights concerning the perceptions of EFL educators and students from various cultural and educational backgrounds regarding language learning through the CPBL approach. The findings determine both the strengths and shortcomings of CPBL in TEFL and its effectiveness as a substitute for traditional methods.

Motivation and Confidence in CPBL

A large segment of the contributors, 37.5%, claimed to be mildly motivated when engaging in Cooperative Project-Based Learning (CPBL). Meanwhile, 25% felt very motivated. However, 15% opted to work individually. Despite the CPBL's efficiency as a language learning method, some students may still favor studying independently due to cultural, educational backgrounds, and negative past teamwork experiences. This range of results is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that cooperative learning increases motivation for some learners but not for others, all is shaped by one's cultural and educational contexts (Al-Tamimi & Tamimi; Putimasurai et al 4). Parallelly, the feedback regarding the confidence level varied, 45% felt confident and 15% very confident in applying CPBL-acquired skills in real-life scenarios. Khoudri and Zeriouh found that 88% of students are confident and motivated enough to create projects independently, and 76% of students are willing to apply the skills they have learned through CPBL in real-life situations (47). This reveals that despite CPBL's ability to help students develop their language skills, some students might need systematic support to fully trust their language abilities when it comes to applying them in real-life situations. Responders with a neutral attitude towards CPBL, who make up 35% of the total participants, demonstrated a need for sustained exposure to authentic, scaffolded CPBL tasks to increase engagement and trust-building with CPBL, and to form positive attitudes regarding its effectiveness in real-life applications.

Effectiveness of CPBL vs. Traditional Methods

A large majority of participants (73.7%) reported that language learning through CPBL is more effective than traditional methods in terms of enhancing students' understanding of the subject matter. This aligns with existing literature findings on active learning methodologies in the classroom and the effectiveness of learner-centered methods in language education. CPBL promotes collaboration, critical thinking, and deeper engagement with knowledge, all of which can improve cognitive processing and retention (Prince 223–31). The active role of students who participate in negotiating meaning and producing new information in a social setting is thought to enhance higher-order thinking skills, as emphasized in Vygotsky's constructivist theory (57; 88; 90).

This tendency is supported by studies showing that students who participate in project-based learning and cooperative learning report high levels of engagement, autonomy, and motivation,

all of which contribute to their perceived learning gains and the increase of learners' communication skills. Furthermore, it renders them more open to cooperation, eventually resulting in better academic and educational outcomes (Beigzadeh et al. 3). Furthermore, language learners benefit from the meaningful learning experiences provided by CPBL, which makes language use more intentional, contextualized, and oriented towards real-world problem solving (Beckett and Slater 109;115). These features are frequently missing or underutilized in traditional teacher-led instruction, which could explain the participants' significant preference for CPBL.

Conversely, 26.3% feel that CPBL is less or as effective as traditional methods. This shows that the CPBL impact may be reliant on its implementation performance, the group's harmony, and individual learner choices. Such perspectives are most frequently the result of variations in implementation quality, dynamics among project teams, or individual learners' preferences for more organized perspectives in training (Bell 42). Scholars warn that if CPBL is not well-structured or if students lack training in teamwork or time management, the technique may fail to achieve its full potential (Brush and Saye 46). Thus, the success of CPBL appears to be mediated by instructional design, instructor facilitation, and learner preparation. These findings imply that, while CPBL can significantly improve comprehension and learner engagement, it is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Its effectiveness is dependent on strategic execution, close observation of group dynamics, and task alignment with learners' language proficiency levels and goals. As a result, teacher training and ongoing professional development are critical for maximizing the pedagogical benefits of CPBL in language classrooms (Krajcik and Blumenfeld 322).

Team Collaboration: Strengths and Challenges

The outcomes of team collaboration revealed a paradox; although some participants expressed a preference for CPBL as a means of developing teamwork and collaboration, others stated their dissatisfaction concerning unequal participation. These problems could be illustrated as controlling members, the absence of responsibility, accountability, and lack of communication, which were redundant themes among susceptible introverted minorities. This corroborates the results found by Hussein, which highlighted that collaboration challenges are caused by course oversaturation, where some students engage in extracurricular activities. The previously mentioned extracurricular activities obstruct equal participation in collaborative tasks (9-12). Despite these barriers, many respondents, including those with unfavorable experiences, affirmed that CPBL trained them with high-value skills. This indicates that CPBL, while being challenging, exerts long-term benefits in skill development, leading to the dismissal of initial difficulties. This corresponds with the findings of Huysken, Olivey, McElmurry, Gao, and Avis, who indicate that CPBL boosts students' performance. These findings highlight the shortcomings and prominent issues commonly faced by students. Furthermore, they advocate for a reform in the approaches employed while using CPBL in language learning sessions, such as assigning roles according to one's abilities, identifying and supporting withdrawn individuals, instilling time management and peer-evaluation abilities among pupils, and developing practical strategies that accurately address participation gaps (6-18).

Preference for CPBL Over Traditional Method

The compelling preference for CPBL (73,7%) of students and educators emphasized its inclination towards inter-activeness and engagement as a pedagogical approach. Respondents accentuated CPBL's function and involvement in overcoming a multitude of obstacles: anxiety induced by the process of using a foreign language during articulating speech as a consequence

of accent-related insecurities and the fear of judgement (Miguel and Carney 3-4). Real-world encouragement of communication skills, creativity nurturing, and productivity instilling. All of which are qualities that can hardly be promoted in traditional lecture-based methods.

Nonetheless, 26.6% of the participants who are in favor of traditional methods highlighted the structure, predictability, and ease of appraisal as central advantages. This preference may also be the result of the clear guidelines the traditional method offers in language learning classrooms with standardized curricula and a fixed format that a lot of students find predictable and easier to follow, especially during the rising stress caused by the exams. Moreover, traditional methods prioritize linguistic accuracy, as highlighted by Sattarova's comparative analysis (217-220). 27.5% of those who endorse the idea of mixing both traditional and collaborative project-based learning approaches propose that a hybridized model combining both collaborative project-based learning strengths with the traditional method's explicitness might prove to be the most potent and viable manner to adjust to diverse language learning needs. This suggests that educators should diversify learning methods to better accommodate different learning styles each student has, this mix of CPBL and traditional methods will lead to achieving educators' goals and objectives (McQuown 6-19).

Cultural and Educational Suggestions

This study also implies possible cultural influences on collaborative project-based language learning perceptibility, given the transcontinental case. For reference, collectivist cultures, such as Morocco and the Philippines, may inherently coincide with collaborative learning, whereas individualistic educational systems, such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom, might be exposed to more resistance from students adapted to ideologies related to independence.

Recommendations for Further Research

Although this study provides valuable information on the students' perspective on CPBL and its effectiveness in boosting their motivation, confidence, and academic performance, more research is required to cover a large number of students and to consider factors like students' preferences for CPBL over traditional methods and the impact of cultural and social background on this methodology and their language learning through CPBL. Future research might also tackle the teachers' role after receiving the necessary training with such a method, further increasing its effectiveness and success rate.

Conclusion

This research investigated the effectiveness and impact of Cooperative Project-Based Learning (CPBL) on language learning, with a focus on students' perspectives and experiences from various parts of the world. Its primary goal was to determine whether CPBL enhances confidence and motivation in EFL classrooms in comparison with traditional methods. Upon reviewing the data collected from the online survey, which was distributed across four countries, the findings clearly show how CPBL influenced students' motivation to work more effectively. It boosted students' confidence in performance and in explaining aspects to peers and showed how beneficial it is compared to traditional learning methods. The results support the emerging agreement in modern language education that CPBL promotes not just linguistic competence but also learner autonomy, cooperation skills, and active participation (Bich Phuong and Tham 103). Participants reported an enhanced readiness to speak and a great sense of ownership over

their learning, both of which are necessary for long-term motivation and academic progress in EFL environments (Maulina 337). Furthermore, this study contributes to a larger body of research that supports the transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogies, which are better suited for the 21st-century classroom, particularly in response to the demands of globalized and technology-mediated learning settings (Li et al. 1). CPBL's blend of real-world relevance, peer interaction, and problem-solving provides learners with meaningful contexts for language use, making learning more authentic and personally relevant (Astaifi 1934).

While traditional approaches are still useful, the findings of this study show that when implemented successfully, CPBL dramatically improves students' emotional and cognitive involvement. These findings emphasize the need to implement instructional frameworks that not only offer material but also foster social and communicative skills required for success in both academic and professional settings.

CPBL helped students track their learning progress and encouraged them to work with others and practice English more often. However, a few other students expressed the opposite opinion, arguing that CPBL is less effective for language learning. This suggests that CPBL does not influence all students equally; its results vary based on students' personalities and learning styles. These findings demonstrate the value of innovative teaching methods like CPBL for language learning classrooms. This method equips students with soft skills like critical thinking, collaborative work, and public speaking, which are vital inside or outside the classroom. The majority of students preferred CPBL, indicating that it adds a sense of enjoyment to learning, unlike traditional passive classrooms.

One major limitation of this study is the small number of participants due to time restrictions during the research process. However, despite this limitation, the research made an important contribution to the TEFL field, particularly because the data were collected across four different countries. It is therefore recommended that future research be conducted with a larger-scale group of participants to explore further and validate the findings presented here.

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On Exile, Migration, and Hybrid Identity: An Interview with Abdelhamid El Beyuki

Mariam Bouaoud[a] and Brahim Barhoun[b]
[ab]Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco.
LLCIS Research Laboratory

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Mariam Bouaoud is a PhD candidate at the Laboratory for Linguistic, Literary, Cultural, and Interdisciplinary Research at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tetouan, Morocco. She holds a Master's degree in Translation Studies from the same university. Her research interests intersect accross translation studies, literary translation, and migration literature.

bouaoud.mariam@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0566-7027

Brahim Barhoun is is a Professor of English Studies in the Department of English Language and Literature at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tétouan, Morocco. He received his PhD in the Literature of English-speaking Countries from the Complutense University of Madrid. His research interests include Anglo-American Literature, Postcolonial Literature, and Peace Literature. Currently, he is the Coordinator of the Interdisciplinary Studies in English Language, Culture & Literature MA Program and the Vice Director of the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural & Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab (Abdelmalek Essaadi University).

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

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Mariam Bouaoud[a] and Brahim Barhoun[b]
[ab]Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco.
LLCIS Research Laboratory

ABSTRACT

This interview offers an in-depth reflection on the intersections of exile, identity, and literary resistance in the work and life of Moroccan novelist Abdelhamid El Beyuki. Through an exploration of his creative vision, El Beyuki examines exile not only as a geographical displacement but as an enduring psychological and ontological condition. Writing becomes a site of resistance, remembrance, and reconstruction, where fragmented autobiographical experience is reassembled through fiction. He discusses how language and narrative serve as tools to preserve marginalized memory, challenge hegemonic discourses, and resist both political erasure and cultural essentialism. Migration, in his view, emerges simultaneously as a symptom of despair and a mode of defiant re-rooting. The conversation also engages with the role of love, ethics, and plurality in reshaping identity, highlighting literature's capacity to offer more humane representations of migration, belonging, and hybridity. Ultimately, El Beyuki presents writing as a space for ethical imagination and cultural continuity that transcends borders.

KEYWORDS

Migration

Exile

Morocco

Identity

Resistance

Note: The following interview was originally conducted in Arabic. It has been translated into English by the authors.

Mariam Bouaoud: Who is Abdelhamid El Beyuki?

Abdelhamid El Beyuki: Abdelhamid El Beyuki is a Moroccan citizen whose personal and intellectual journey has, since youth, been closely tied to urgent questions of freedom, justice, and democracy—or at least, what I believed was my mission as an engaged human being: to dream of change, to expose injustice, to reduce class inequality, and to defend human rights, social justice, and equality.

These hopes intensified when I was forced to leave Morocco in 1984 after the uprising in the north. The journey of forced exile, following a 30-year prison sentence in absentia, did not truly end even after I returned in 2000. My path has moved through political, unionist, and human rights activism, and eventually into literature and fiction. The latter emerged directly from lived experience and has continued as a form of resistance against injustice, hatred, and racism.

My life has been marked by a constant questioning of the self, of identity, and of its continuous transformation. I often feel that I do not have a conventional biography. I don't see myself as someone with a single life story to tell. Perhaps I am the sum of the characters I imagined, created, or inhabited throughout my exile and travels—characters in my novels, in my thoughts, in my realities.

What could be called my "autobiography" is only a fragmented mosaic of broken experiences. It follows no precise chronology; rather, it reflects a state of overlapping moments and inner

Contact ✉ bouaoud.mariam@etu.uae.ac.ma ✉ bbarhoun@uae.ac.ma
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tensions, as though I had lived several lives in different places and times—between Tangier and Madrid, between fiction and reality, between politics and literature. Writing is the only way I can grasp the shape of my identity.

Writing has never been a luxury or aesthetic exercise. It is, and has always been, a way to reconstruct the self—not as a stable entity, but as a process of constant breakdown and rebuilding. Fiction has allowed me to confront my fears and, at times, served as a weapon against forgetting. Each character is a face of exile, and each narrative is a delayed confession or a cry unheard of in its time.

That is why, when I'm asked to present a biography, I often feel unable to do so—not because of a lack of facts, but because facts alone cannot express what I have lived. My experience is not a timeline; it is a state, a question, one that touches on meaning, existence, and destiny.

So instead of a biography, I offer fragments, reflections, and testimonies, perhaps broken mirrors that I leave to the reader to arrange, if they wish.

I am not my name, my past, or even my books. I am the echo of the marginal, the exiled, the oppressed, the dreamer, the broken. I am a project of identity still forming—unfinished except through writing, and complete only when the pen falls silent.

MB: Your first novel appeared only in 2013, more than a decade after your return from exile. Was this delay intentional, or were there earlier attempts that were not published?
AE: I was indeed late in publishing my first novel. *Eyes of Exile "ʿuyūn al-manfā"* was not the first novel I wrote, but the first one I published. Before that, I had written several manuscripts that were never published, as well as short stories in Spanish that appeared in newspapers and magazines in Spain.

Still, publishing my first novel in Arabic after returning from exile felt like a confession—a recognition that exile doesn't truly end, and that the person in exile never fully returns. Exile becomes a lasting condition, marked by conflicted and persistent feelings around identity and belonging—feelings that are no longer the same as those we carried when we left, or when we returned, or even what we imagined return would be.

Alongside fiction, I have also published other works in Spanish in fields beyond the novel.

MB: How did migration impact your creative vision and literary journey?
AE: Migration has shaped my creative vision and the core themes of almost all my novels. It is the source of many of the issues I witnessed firsthand as a social activist in Spain and also experienced personally. Still, migration is not my only reason for writing. Forced exile and the ongoing feeling of uprootedness and existential confusion also played a significant role.

For me, writing can be seen as both a refuge and a continuous search for identity, belonging, and connection with others, with places, with time, and even with existence itself. That is why I see fiction as both a shelter and a space for addressing various humanitarian concerns, especially those related to human rights and human suffering.

MB: In your novels—and even in their titles—you frequently use the term exile. Exile is commonly defined as the place of residence for someone who has been expelled from their homeland, and it often carries negative connotations. How, then, can a place marked by such characteristics become the site of a new beginning?
AE: I believe that writing in exile—or exile literature—is a genre of its own, not in the traditional sense of literary classification, but as a practice that emerges from a liminal space, where language serves a dual purpose: preserving the memory of exile while also expressing a constantly evolving new reality. This influences literary writing by encouraging new narrative forms and by reshaping how identity, belonging, and language are approached.

If Camus sought to create a "non-style" or "zero-degree" writing, then the exiled writer is similarly driven to break away from conventional literary forms. They are compelled to find a language that can express the experience of alienation and uprootedness while still remaining authentic. In this sense, exile literature becomes one of the most human forms of writing, as it expresses life between two worlds and the ongoing search for a language that transcends borders, carrying both suffering and hope simultaneously.

MB: In a previous interview, you stated: "The literary achievement is an achievement of exile… and the writer was exiled… and perhaps is still, despite his return to his homeland." Could you elaborate on that? How can exile continue to affect a person even after their physical return?
AE: In my view, and based on my own experience, exile brings about a profound transformation in the writer's language and style. It confronts them with questions of identity and belonging, pushing them to reshape their expressive tools. Exile literature often reflects this through its distinct language, marked by experimentation and openness to nontraditional narrative forms. The exiled writer frequently blends the real and the dreamlike to express inner fragmentation and alienation.

Such texts also tend to exhibit linguistic hybridity, where words from different languages blend, reflecting diverse cultural influences and lending the writing a cosmopolitan tone. At the same time, language becomes a means of evoking the original place, charged with nostalgia and memories that strive to counteract forgetting, thereby maintaining a connection with the homeland despite the distance.

Exile literature is more than a branch of migration literature. It's a creative space that resists borders, where language becomes a kind of homeland, and the meaning of belonging is redefined. If Camus sought a zero-degree writing style, exile literature moves between the intense need to express and the impossibility of recovering the lost homeland, except through the act of writing. For me, exile does not end with physical return. In many ways, return itself becomes a new form of exile.

MB: Through your works, the reader can detect a tone of defiance and resistance. Would it be accurate to say that you approach writing as an act of resistance? And if so, what exactly are you resisting?
AE: For me, writing—especially fiction—remains suspended between freedom and commitment, between the personal and the collective, and between writing as resistance and writing as a cultural product shaped by market forces and audience reception. Perhaps, in the end, the answer lies in continuing to write—not as an act of certainty, but as a constant search for meaning in a contradictory world.

From my perspective, writing is more than just a literary activity. It is a practice shaped by linguistic and cultural tension between the self and the other, between the lost homeland and the new place. In this way, it echoes Barthes' idea that the language of writing should reflect the writer's reality. In exile, however, that reality is fragmented, shaped by memory and displacement.

MB: Do you believe that literature can change the European, or more broadly, Western perspective on migration, particularly on irregular migration?
AE: Yes, I believe literature can play a crucial role in reshaping the European—and more broadly Western—perspective on migration, including irregular migration. Literature doesn't present statistics or brief messages of solidarity; it powerfully presents human experiences, allowing readers to see the world from the migrant's point of view and, at times, to see themselves through that same lens.

Through novels, short stories, and literary testimonies, literature reveals suffering, injustice, and the true motivations behind migration. It helps challenge the harsh, dehumanizing stereotypes often spread by the media.

For example, when a European reader encounters the story of a father who lost his children at sea, or a young man who risked his life to flee war or poverty, it can spark a personal or historical reflection, as is often the case in Spain. This can shift the image of the migrant from that of a threat or burden to something more human and familiar. Literature fosters empathy, opens the door to understanding, and encourages a more humane and just view of migration.

MB: Your novels consistently engage with the theme of religion, distinguishing between genuine faith and the commodification of religion. To what extent do you believe religion is instrumentalized for political and personal interests, whether in the context of Islam or Christianity, as portrayed in your works?

AE: The misuse of religion for political and personal purposes is a deeply rooted historical issue, and many thinkers have addressed it. While I can't go into full theoretical detail here, these ideas have certainly influenced my writing. For example, Michel Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge is particularly relevant to how religion can be instrumentalized, even though he didn't focus specifically on Islam. Foucault suggests that "religious discourse" can become a tool of power when it is used to create a version of truth that controls individuals and shapes their behavior.

In this sense, religion shifts from being a spiritual system to becoming a means of political and social domination. This issue is strongly present in my novels, especially in *Stories of Exile "ḥikāyāt al-manfā"*, where I explore the complexity of religious freedom and the difficulty of distinguishing between sincere faith and the commodification of religion. I also highlight the utilitarian exploitation of religion, while reasserting its human and ethical value, free from political misuse or sanctification.

MB: In your novel *The Hybrid "al-janīs*", you illustrate through the suffering of Saida's family that irregular migration is not a decision, but an inevitable outcome of an oppressive reality. In this context, do you view migration as an act of resistance or as an expression of despair and loss of hope?

AE: I believe irregular migration involves more than just crossing borders. Beyond describing the tragedy of the journey itself, I am more concerned with the human dimension of migration. In my novel, this is reflected in the characters' dialogues, where they express feelings of fragmentation and ask, "Who are we?" or "Where do we belong?" These questions are answered by Siham, who says:

"We are all from here and elsewhere. Those who claim the purity of race, blood, or belonging are themselves products of migration, displacement, expulsion, and religious fanaticism. We are all forced to live in a world that no longer resembles our original homeland—if it ever existed. Many left their countries, while many others remained. Yet, they can no longer recognize it. The essence of the homeland is the human being, and the essence of identity is plurality and difference. These are the foundation of human development." (*The Hybrid* "*al-janīs*", p. 146)

Within this context, migration is indeed an act of resistance and a means of asserting belonging, even though it often stems from despair and a loss of hope.

MB: In *Walking on the Wind "al-mashī ʿalā al-rīḥ"* , you write: "How can a person be clandestine? What does it mean to classify human beings as legal or illegal? Aren't they both

human?" Is this meant as a critique of immigration laws? And how, in your view, can such laws be unjust or dehumanizing?

AE: My novel, *Walking on the Wind* "*al-mashī ʿalā al-rīḥ*", leads the reader into a world somewhat different from that of my earlier works, as it focuses on the experiences of African migrants during their journey toward the northern shore. It portrays their lives from multiple perspectives—their suffering and moments of joy, the abuse they face, and the solidarity they sometimes encounter—not only after reaching Europe, but also while in Morocco, and even earlier in their journey.

The novel also offers a critical perspective on racialized Western laws that govern migration and migrants, often based on political or economic interests, which frequently contradict the dominant discourse that claims to uphold human rights, solidarity, and other hollow slogans.

MB: In *The Bridegroom of Death*, you enter the realm of historical fiction for the first time. How did you experience this transition? What makes it unique? And can the novel be considered a form of documenting a forgotten historical period?

AE: According to Paul Ricoeur's concept of "narrative temporality," the novel is not a mirror of history or a direct form of historiography, but a reconstruction of time through imagination. The story produces what Ricoeur calls "the time of meaning"—a kind of time shaped by collective consciousness rather than neutral, physical time. In this way, the novel becomes a tool for shaping collective memory and even constructing cultural identity.

This is the narrative approach I have followed. I draw on historical events from both shores, without abandoning the themes that define my literary project: identity, belonging, and cultural and religious diversity. In this sense, the novel is an open space, not restricted by the rules of history, but capable of reshaping it each time the story is retold.

What, then, gives the novel its particular strength in times of crisis and global transformation? In my view, the historical novel expresses what official history often cannot. It offers an alternative form of history—one that captures the complexity of human experience through the micro-histories of individuals.

With these characteristics, *The Bridegroom of Death* may be classified as a historical novel, though I don't consider it historical in the conventional sense of traditional historical fiction.

MB: Your literary work and life experience reflect a profound belief in the idea of a shared human identity. How can an individual have or acquire a hybrid identity?

AE: Identity is, by nature, hybrid. It is formed through layers of cultural accumulation, in which migration and exile play a central role. As Juan Goytisolo argues, identity is "bastard" or illegitimate—not in a negative sense, but to emphasize its mixed, non-pure cultural and racial character.

Take James Joyce, for example. Although his exile was voluntary and self-imposed, his works—especially Ulysses—show a strong concern with Irish identity and alienation. His language reflects both a nostalgic attachment to his homeland and a form of linguistic experimentation that breaks through traditional barriers.

MB: Many thinkers and literary figures consider love not only as an individual emotion, but as a human force that transforms the individual, becoming both an ethical stance toward the world and a means of healing the self and reality. In a world increasingly harsh and fractured by wars and explosions, love becomes a form of resistance. Hannah Arendt notes: "Love cannot be politicized. Still, it stands as a force that opposes naked power." That is, it does not operate within systems of power, but re-centers the human being as a sensitive and ethical being. Thus, love becomes a means of healing wounds, especially in societies marked by a violent past.

AE: Love has the power to dismantle stereotypes surrounding identity, religion, and class. As Judith Butler argues, identity is not fixed, but shaped through relationships. In this sense, love enables individuals to transcend cultural and social constraints, as it integrates the other into the self in an intimate and non-coercive manner.

As Roland Barthes wrote in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragment*s, the lover is the one who tries to speak the unspeakable. Love reveals our true selves—not the versions shaped by dogma, class, or inherited memory—but the self that emerges in a rare moment of honesty, opening the door to new dimensions of thought and feeling.

Similarly, love can be a profound entry point for rebuilding the self in a way that is free, reconciled, and transformative. It is not a magical solution, but an intimate space that reconnects us to our essential humanity, where encountering the other becomes not a confrontation, but an opportunity for complementarity and renewal.

MB: In light of this, how do you define the role of the novelist or the intellectual?
AE: In my view, the role of the intellectual or novelist goes beyond producing knowledge or crafting narratives. It is rooted in ethical responsibility and functions as an act of resistance.

Edward Said defines the intellectual as someone who lives in a state of exile—one who refuses to submit to power or ideology, and instead stands as a critical voice from the margins, witnessing injustice and defending the truth, even when that truth is uncomfortable.

Gramsci, on the other hand, sees the intellectual as a shaper of historical consciousness, not as someone isolated in an ivory tower, but as an active participant in the struggle over hegemony and power, with the goal of challenging dominant discourses and contributing to the formation of a new historical bloc.

Meanwhile, Sartre emphasizes that the engaged intellectual or novelist has a duty not to write for pleasure or approval, but to write in order to provoke change, because, in his view, the word is an action, and silence is a form of complicity.

Based on these perspectives, I believe that the intellectual is not merely a mirror of reality, but someone who deconstructs it in order to reconfigure it. The intellectual or novelist does not simply tell a story, but frames their consciousness.

MB: Your novels often reference major events that have profoundly impacted society, like the Mohcine Fikri case, the shooting of Hayat, the Years of Lead, and forced conscription during the Spanish Civil War. Would you say that the inclusion of these events functions as a form of literary archiving?
AE: From my perspective, the novel serves as a kind of archive of events, as it remains a vast space for imagination, even when it draws on real-life facts. Still, the novelist should not be seen as a historian. What the novelist recounts is often a form of microhistory—one that escapes the scope of historians and formal academic research.

The novel is told with the freedom fiction allows, yet the events it draws upon remain deeply resonant for the reader. They endure not only in academic discourse but also in collective imagination, especially when adapted into cinema, theater, or visual arts. For example, Benito Pérez Galdós's novel *Aita Tetuán* conveys much more about the war in Tetouan than many historical accounts. Likewise, Picasso's Guernica tells us more about the Spanish Civil War than most research papers. This, of course, does not mean that the novel replaces historical writing, but rather, that it complements it.

In this context, I included the case of Mohcine Fikri in my novel *The Hybrid "al-janīs"*, though the fictional protagonist is from Casablanca rather than the Rif. This suggests that the book portrays a particular behavior or societal pattern, rather than recounting a specific event with all its real-life details.

MB: How do you view the translations of your literary works? Do they preserve the identity you envisioned for them even after translation?
AE: I believe that translating literary texts requires more than just fluency in two languages—it demands creative ability and deep engagement with all the nuances of the original work. To be honest, the French translations of my first novel *Eyes of Exile* "*ʿuyūn al-manfā*" as well as the forthcoming translation of *Walking on the Wind* "*al-mashī ʿalā al-rīḥ*" have been highly successful.

However, I see a good literary translation as the creation of a new text—one that shares the same title, but carries its own tone, emotional texture, and interpretive layers. In many ways, these belong more to the translator than to the original author. This was precisely how I felt while reviewing both translations. It showed me how crucial the translator's role is in capturing and conveying not just the words, but the spirit and depth of the text.

In short, I believe the task of evaluating a creative literary translation belongs to the reader, not the author, since authors are rarely objective when assessing translations of their own work.

MB: Do you have any upcoming novels scheduled for publication soon?
AE: In addition to my recent novel *The Strangers' Whispering* "*hasīs al-ghurabā'*", which was released during the National Book Fair in April, I've recently completed a collection of travel literature that is expected to be published by the end of 2025. The theme of travel in this collection goes beyond geography and also explores the dimension of time.

I'm also currently working on a new novel with a historical touch. I use the phrase "historical touch" deliberately, as it is not a historical novel in the traditional sense.

MB: Will your future works explore other forms of migration besides irregular migration? And do you intend to remain faithful to the themes of migration and identity throughout your literary career?
AE: Undoubtedly, migration takes many forms beyond irregular or clandestine movement, just as exile can be either forced or voluntary. My previous novels were never limited to irregular migration or the kind of forced exile I experienced. Instead, they reflect broader aspects of life across both shores and through different periods.

My novels are not purely tragic or somber; they also portray moments of joy, love, and human connection. In short, I intend to remain committed to exploring the themes of hybrid identity and cultural coexistence, rather than focusing solely on a single theme.

As literary history shows us—and as the Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo constantly reminds us—the pursuit of a pure, authentic, nationalist past often reduces it to caricature, leading to its distortion and impoverishment.

MB: How do you see the future of Moroccan literature in exile?
AE: I believe the future of Moroccan literature in exile is promising, both in terms of the volume of work being produced and the diversity of its themes, whether written in the languages of host countries or the language of origin, such as Arabic.

I hope that Moroccan literature, which transcends borders, including the work of writers of Moroccan origin, will continue to engage with questions of identity and plural belonging.
MB: One last word to the new generation of bilingual and bicultural young writers.
AE: I have always approached advice with some hesitation. It often feels like a blunt gesture, primarily when directed at a promising young generation stepping into life with such potential. Still, I offer these thoughts as a way of sharing experience, not prescribing rules.

To emerging bilingual and bicultural writers, I would say: do not see this duality as a burden or contradiction, but as a unique creative opportunity. In this context, literary writing can serve as a bridge between two worlds—a free space in which to construct a flexible, hybrid identity.

Do not be afraid to write in your mother tongues, even those that may not belong to any official dictionary or conform to the grammar of a single language. These are the languages of experience, of contact, of reflection.

From my own experience, I've come to see cultural and linguistic plurality not as superficial difference, but as a narrative and symbolic reservoir—one that allows the writer to explore the complexities of the self and the world more deeply. This plurality enables you to challenge stereotypes and express what others cannot—or will not—say.

As for ambition, don't limit it to awards or external recognition. Let your literary project be a space to understand yourself and to shape your existential questions. The world is full of voices today, but the true reader still seeks one thing: a voice that is honest, real, and resonant.



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The Experimental Turn in the Moroccan Novel, 1976-1989,

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Hakima Choukri
Abdelmalek Essaadi University
LLCIS Research Laboratory

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Hakima Choukri is a PhD student at the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural and Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab at the University of Abdelmalek Essaadi, Tetouan, Morocco. Her research interests include minority fiction, indigenous ecofeminist literature, and postcolonial trauma theory.

hakima.choukri@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5531-455X

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Book Review

The Experimental Turn in the Moroccan Novel, 1976-1989

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Anouar El Younssi's *The Experimental Turn in the Moroccan Novel, 1976-1989,* is an indispensable project to the contemporary surge in Moroccan literary production. It maps a new trajectory for Moroccan literary history and evolution. While he conveniently builds upon previous evaluations by prominent critics like Said Yaqtine, Muhammad Amansur, and Abdilali Butayyib, Younssi is one of the few scholars theorizing about the Moroccan novel in English. By doing so, Younssi aspires to bring Moroccan literature to the recognition and visibility of Anglo-American academics and English-language translators, thereby increasing Anglophone readers' accessibility to Moroccan literature and situating the latter within the world literature canon. Younssi bestows upon the Moroccan novel the same literary prestige as its Mashriqi counterpart has enjoyed by positioning it within the broader Arabic literary and cultural contexts and exploring its engagement with cosmopolitan trends in Western literature. He draws on various Arab and Western theorists and novelists, including Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud, Naguib Mahfouz, Abdulkarim Ghallab, and Mikhail Bakhtin, to illustrate the theoretical and literary intersections of the Moroccan experimental novel.

Younssi's analysis focuses on three trendsetting sources: Ahmad al-Madini's *Zaman bayna al-Wiladah wa al-Hulm*, or *Time between Birth and Dream* (1976); Muhammad Barradah's *The Game of Forgetting* (1987); and Abdullah al-Arwi's *Papers: Idriss' Intellectual Auto/biography* (1989). The monograph treats these novels as quintessentially experimental, redefining fundamental concepts related to literary experimentalism and ultimately reconceptualizing the Moroccan and Arab experimental tendencies. For example, it politicizes realism and challenges its commonly established incompatibility with experimentalism. The Moroccan experimental novel, Younssi argues, serves as a realistic reflection of the socio-political conditions of Moroccan postcoloniality. It is geared toward a (re)generation of literary originality through an open dialogue with al-turath or the Arab-Islamic tradition and Western literary and theoretical currents. This transgenerational and transcultural dialogue is a literary metonymy of the dialogue that post-independence Moroccan society created to renegotiate a Moroccan identity conflicted about allegiance to Arab-Muslim tradition and a postcolonial cultural openness. By contextualizing Moroccan novelistic experimentation in a socio-culturally ambiguous milieu, Younssi credits al-tajrib writers with a noble *raison d'être* that demonstrates the literary current's socio-political awareness and sensibility. The experimentalist ambition for narrative, stylistic, and generic novelty reflects the intrinsic need for ideological and literary gentrification.

Younssi's research mobilizes theoretically pertinent approaches that attest to its incisiveness. It provides a multifarious analysis enriched by historical snippets and the socio-political zeitgeist. Arming his analysis with a postcolonial lens, Younssi de-Westernizes and provincializes the history of Arab literature, linking the Arabic and Moroccan novel to Arab-Islamic literary heritage, emancipating it from literary reliance on Western prototypes, and revisualizing its autonomy and authenticity. While he conforms to the mainstream view that recognizes Mahfuzian literature as the *beau idéal* of Arabic literary modernity, Younssi problematizes the perception of the Mahfuzian oeuvre as a reproduction of Dickensian and

Contact ✉ hakima.choukri@etu.uae.ac.ma

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Balzacian composition. He reminds his reader of Mahfuz's post-1967 works, through which the Nobel laureate emerged as an authentic voice for socio-political concerns, laying the thematic groundwork for later socio-politically cognizant Arab and Moroccan authors, such as Ghallab, who is considered Mahfuz's Moroccan incarnation. One of the book's scholarly accomplishments, Younssi bridges literary and political history by marking the year 1967, which witnessed Arab defeat in the Six-Day War with Israel, as a climacteric stage for Arab literary authenticity. Such recaptured authenticity is epitomized by "intertextuality," whereby the Arabic novel engages in an experimental discourse with tradition, thus invalidating the recalcitrance often associated with experimentalism. Younssi's reevaluation of the multifaceted interconnection between Moroccan al-tajrib and Arab-Islamic al-turath is configured through a triadic model of tradition. Younssi outlines the religious tradition critiqued through al-Madini's subtextual aesthetics-substance correlation while foregrounding the philosophical and historical tradition addressed in al-Arwi's *Awraq* and highlighting the invocation of Moroccan popular tradition in Barradah's debut novel. This groundbreaking model demystifies previous misconceptions about experimentalism's antithetical relation to tradition.

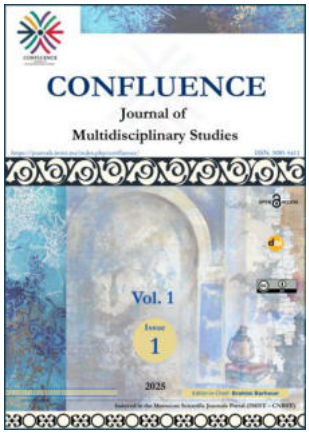
Younssi's critical thoroughness highlights previously unexplored aspects of the Moroccan experimental novel. Al-Madini's novel is studied as an example of experimentalism's simultaneous critique of and engagement with Arab-Islamic heritage, reflecting the evolution of Moroccan postcolonial consciousness. Younssi designates *Zaman* as the precursor of Moroccan experimentalism that expands the stylistic terrain of the text to encompass extratextual spheres. He reads the psychological despair and gloominess depicted in the novel as a textual reflection of the exoteric sense of defeat engulfing the Moroccan and Arab collective psyche after 1967. The novel, Younssi adds, espouses a "poetics of dissent" that challenges the dominant patriarchal and ideological metanarratives of post-independence Moroccan reality. Younssi is particularly invested in the novel's fusion of aesthetic and political dimensions as one of the fundamental elements of Moroccan experimentalism. He also locates this intersection in al-Arwi's work, which he designates as an experimental novel par excellence for its refusal of generic and ideological conventionality and its engagement in a manifold critique that addresses both form and ideology, aiming to regenerate Moroccan and "Arab/Arabo-Amazigh" subjectivity and literary originality. This quest is shared by Barradah, who explores narrative methods to create a textual portrait of the extratextual, experimental reality in modernist Morocco. Younssi highlights Barradah's experimental mobilization of Bakhtinian heteroglossia to question the socio-political vicissitudes of the post-independence context. Younssi's ability to bring the Moroccan experimental novel into dialogue with its Western and non-Western references while highlighting its autonomy is one of the book's major strengths.

Younssi's criticism redefines experimentalism from the perspective of Moroccan literary and socio-political progression. It pinpoints the Western trends with which the experimental novel engages and investigates the latter's subtextual convolutions with Arab-Islamic heritage as a symptom of literary openness rather than blind adoption. Younssi revisits the concept of "compromise" to track the experimental novel's oscillation between innovation and tradition. He successfully refutes different misconceptions surrounding Moroccan experimentalism. However, Younssi's examination is unsuccessful in incorporating gendered narratives and consequently occludes the potential female contribution to Moroccan experimentalism. This absence results in an androcentric, one-dimensional depiction of Moroccan literature. Moroccan women authors like Halima Ben Haddou and Leila Abouzeid, whose works fall within the titular timeline, are neither referenced nor suggested as works belonging to the same literary and socio-cultural scene as the examined sources. This also establishes a preference for the male literary experience as the trendsetter, inferring the inaptness of gendered writings to engender novel and novelistic trends. The book's disregard for Moroccan female-authored

works compromises the consistency of its conclusion that the new Moroccan novel was an integral part of the (post)modernist project in Morocco, especially considering the significance of the feminist cause and writings to the inauguration of Moroccan modernity and the postcolonial dialogue between innovation and traditionalism.

The book's discussion additionally misses previously published works that introduce and detail literary trailblazers authored by Arab and Moroccan women. Bouthaina Shaaban's *Voices Revealed: Arab Women Novelists, 1898-2000* (2009) and Joseph T. Zeidan's *Arab Women Novelists* (1995) enlist numerous female voices that have shaped Arab literary and cultural modernity whereas Suellen Diaconoff's (2009) survey *The Myth of the Silent Woman* explores the Moroccan female literary arena, including post-independence women authors. Younssi's reference to Arab literature, on the other hand, is markedly informed by Roger Allen's *The Arabic Novel,* which dedicates only a few pages to women-authored works in Arabic literature. One of Younssi's main contributions is emphasizing the 1967 devastation as a catalyst for Arab and Moroccan literary originality. While Younssi thoroughly explores how Arab and Moroccan novelists, such as Mahfuz and al-Madini, textually embody the consequent socio-political and historical desolation, he excludes Arab female authors, such as Liana Badr, whose works also novelize the general state of despair following the Arab-Israeli war. Younssi's study, furthermore, exhibits a scholarly fixation on the Egyptian, particularly Mahfuzian, novel as an initiator of literary discourses despite its aspiration to situate the Moroccan experimental novel within the broader Arabic literature. It overlooks the equally invaluable contributions of Syrian and Palestinian novelists, for instance, to Arabic literary experimentation and only passingly refers to other Maghribi experimental works.

The growing interest in the Moroccan novel has created a scholarly need for elaborate studies such as Younssi's. Through his innovative project, Younssi posits a "third" space that allows for the equal incorporation of innovation, tradition, and modernity in Moroccan experimentalism. Younssi delineates the achievability of such an avant-garde amalgamation through various textual methods, primarily fragmentation, which orients the correlation between experimentalism's aesthetics and content by sustaining the subtextual interaction with the Arab-Muslim tradition while simultaneously exploring innovative and universal paradigms. In other words, Moroccan experimentalism traverses Western literary routes without renouncing local literary rites. Younssi should be credited for reclaiming the Arabic and Moroccan experimental novel's indebtedness to Arab-Islamic literary heritage and emphasizing its engagement with the post-independence status quo. Younssi's research can be situated within the postcolonial project to de-Westernize literary studies. It successfully clears Mashriqi and Maghribi experimentalism from Western influence and underscores its quest for stylistic and generic originality and independence. *The Experimental Turn* is an illuminating study of Moroccan literary modernity and an imperative read for critics, litterateurs, and comparative researchers. While it is a trailblazing project in Moroccan literary scholarship, its limitations pave the way for more nuanced research highlighting gendered and other Maghribi contributions to the experimental shift in Moroccan literature.



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On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of Al-Andalus,

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Ahlam El Haddad
Abdelmalek Essaadi University
LLCIS Research Laboratory

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Ahlam El Haddad 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 got her MA degree in "English Literature and History of Ideas" from the same faculty. Her research interests include historical fiction, Moroccan women's writing, and postcolonial narratives.

ahlam.elhaddad1@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2396-7208

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Book Review

On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of Al-Andalus

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Eric Calderwood's *On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of Al-Andalus* is a significant and timely exploration of how the legacy of al-Andalus, the period of Muslim rule in medieval Spain and Portugal from 711 to 1492, continues to resonate in contemporary cultural memory. At the heart of the book is the argument that al-Andalus functions today not as a mere historical relic but rather as a powerful and dynamic cultural metaphor. Unlike traditional scholarship that often romanticizes al-Andalus through the lens of *convivencia*, portraying it as a model of harmony and interfaith coexistence, Calderwood complicates this narrative by examining how al-Andalus is evoked by writers, artists, and thinkers to serve political, artistic, and ideological purposes. Scholars such as Christina Civantos, in Between Argentines and Arabs, and co-authors Rachel Scott and AbdoolKarim Vakil, in Reimagining al-Andalus, also diverge from nostalgic and idealized readings of al-Andalus. Yet, while they bring to the fore themes such as translation and symbolic mobility, Calderwood delves further into the influence of the political context, positionality, and ideological contradiction in shaping modern evocations of Andalusi memory.

Calderwood's blend of literary analysis with cultural historiography structures the book thematically, with each chapter focusing on a distinct interpretive lens. The first two chapters investigate how the memory of al-Andalus intersects with debates about ethnic identities. The first chapter, "The Arab al-Andalus," highlights how Arab writers and artists, from the eighth century to the present, have imagined al-Andalus as a pinnacle of Arab civilization. They celebrate it as an integral part of Arab cultural identity and heritage, often downplaying the foundational role of North African Berbers (Amazigh), despite their central involvement in the conquest and defense of al-Andalus. Calderwood focuses on the works of the Lebanese novelist and intellectual Jurji Zaydan, which he considers as the predecessors to a more recent phenomenon: the rise of Arabic-language television dramas in the early 21st century. Both Zaydan's novels and these television dramas, according to Calderwood, construct an Arab-centered vision of al-Andalus that glosses over ethnic and cultural diversity. On the other hand, the second chapter, "The Berber al-Andalus," examines the Berber intellectual and artistic efforts to reclaim their role in shaping the legacy of al-Andalus, thereby challenging the prevailing Arab-Islamic narrative of al-Andalus. By analyzing significant milestones in this ongoing debate about the role that Berbers have played in the history of al-Andalus, such as Driss Chraibi's *Birth at Dawn,* Calderwood foregrounds a specifically Berber al-Andalus that diverges from the dominant narrative embedded in Moroccan national identity since the 1930s.

Building on this exploration of identity, the third chapter, "The Feminist al-Andalus," sheds light on the intersection of gender and the Andalusi legacy. It showcases how feminist writers and artists have portrayed *al-Andalus* as a space of freedom, creativity, and cultural achievement for Muslim women, offering an alternative genealogy of feminism. In the late nineteenth century, Orientalist discourses dominated Western perceptions of the Muslim world, portraying it as stagnant and oppressive, particularly towards women. As a response to these stereotypes, female writers, scholars, and artists began to challenge the dominant narrative by exploring alternative historical perspectives. In more recent years, Arab and Muslim women continue to use the memory of al-Andalus as a tool to challenge patriarchal structures, combat stereotypes, and advocate for gender equality. By reclaiming and reimagining the history of al-

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Andalus, they seek to empower themselves and challenge the limitations imposed by enduring, traditional gender roles and societal expectations. The chapter on feminist al-Andalus discourse emphasizes the contributions of Muslim and Arab women in various fields, including literature, science, philosophy, and governance, demonstrating how al-Andalus provides a historical precedent for the empowerment of Muslim and Arab women that counters Orientalist assumptions.

The Fourth chapter in Calderwood's book, "The Palestinian al-Andalus," analyses the different meanings and uses of al-Andalus in the Palestinian context, revealing how it has been invoked as a metaphor for displacement, exile, and cultural endurance. The comparison between al-Andalus and Palestine has turned historically into a widespread idiom embraced by Palestinian writers and poets throughout the Arab world. They contend that Palestine faces a similar fate to al-Andalus, with foreign powers encroaching upon its sovereignty and displacing its people. Hence, al-Andalus serves as a shared cultural touchstone for understanding Palestine and situating its struggles within a broader historical context. However, Calderwood argues that al-Andalus holds a much deeper significance for Palestinian writers and their allies beyond being a mere cautionary tale. Drawing on the renowned Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, Calderwood articulates a distinct perspective on al-Andalus, stating that it continues to shape Palestinian literature by linking past, present, and future. The last chapter, "The Harmonious al-Andalus," shifts the focus to music, exploring how artists from diverse cultural backgrounds have utilized their cultural medium to perform and engage with the memory of al-Andalus. Finally, the epilogue revisits the symbolic resonance of Cordoba both in Spain and the United States, showcasing how the legacy of al-Andalus continues to create political, ideological, and cultural debate in the present.

One of the book's most significant strengths is its groundbreaking application of two conceptual tools: metonymy and position, which effectively navigate the varied and contested meanings of al-Andalus. Given the symbolic and ideological complexity of the legacy of al-Andalus, Calderwood notes that metonymy is a compelling conceptual tool that allows him to trace how specific elements of al-Andalus, such as the Umayyads, Cordoba, female poets, or the Moriscos, are selectively invoked to stand as representative of the broader whole. Hence, Calderwood's deployment of metonymy opens up new avenues to explore how various communities appropriate specific aspects of Andalusi heritage to stand as representatives of the entire legacy. On the other hand, the concept of position, derived from Stuart Hall's notion of the "politics of position," further grounds these interpretations by emphasizing how each cultural player—writers, actors, or readers, position themselves in respect to al-Andalus based on their geographic location, political ideology, or communal identity; it is their standpoints that inform representations of al-Andalus. Therefore, by bringing together metonymy and position, Calderwood seeks to highlight how different subject positions enable various approaches to the legacy of al-Andalus and its relevance to both the present and the future.

Another significant strength of the book is its innovative interdisciplinary and multilingual scope. Calderwood effectively bridges cultural studies, historiography, literary theory, and anthropology to map the cultural afterlives of al-Andalus, investigating how its memory functions as an active tool of meaning-making in contemporary culture. Calderwood also engages with sources in Arabic, French, Spanish, and English, drawing on a wide array of cultural texts that include poetry, novels, music, cinema, and political discourse. These texts, in turn, span diverse geographies, including the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the United States, highlighting how the legacy of al-Andalus is not tied to a specific place but instead circulates globally. Rather than reinforcing the romanticized and idealized representations of al-Andalus, the book challenges this narrow Eurocentric framework, emphasizing that it often marginalizes Arab and Muslim voices. Nevertheless, the book not only includes Arab and Muslim voices as supplementary perspectives but also places them at the center, ethically

reorienting the discourse about Andalusi legacy. This also enables Calderwood to provide a global perspective that deals with al-Andalus as a contested cultural terrain where narratives about belonging, identity, and power are frequently negotiated.

However, although the book does provide a comprehensive and wide-ranging exploration of the cultural afterlives of al-Andalus, it omits certain voices and perspectives. Calderwood himself acknowledges the limited engagement with the cultural memory of al-Andalus in certain regions beyond the Mediterranean and Arab-majority contexts. These omissions, while understandable given the book's already broad scope, point out new avenues for future research that could further enrich the study of al-Andalus and its legacy. Moreover, the book's thematic organization, while it allows for a focused analysis of diverse representations of al-Andalus, Arab nationalism, Berber identity, feminist discourse, and music, it also tends to compartmentalize the analysis. It may inadvertently reinforce the notion that these strands of memory exist separately, rather than as intersecting narratives. Hence, a more integrative and intersectional analysis across themes—especially where narratives overlap—could have enhanced the book's central thesis and underscored the entangled nature of cultural memory. Nevertheless, these limitations do not detract from the valuable contributions of this seminal book; instead, they open up new avenues for research in contemporary scholarship on al-Andalus.

Eric Calderwood's *On Earth or in Poems* is a decisive contribution to contemporary scholarship on the Andalusi legacy. Rather than presenting al-Andalus as a fixed historical period, Calderwood reimagines it as a dynamic and contested cultural space where identities, ideologies, and power structures are continuously negotiated. Through his interdisciplinary approach, multilingual sources, and nuanced analysis, Calderwood challenges reductive and romanticized narratives, offering instead a pluralistic vision of memory and identity. This work is an essential resource for scholars of cultural memory, historiography, postcolonial studies, and the political uses of the past.