

Translating Taboos in Literary Texts: The Case of Translated *La Nuit Sacrée*

Nadia Ghounane

University of Saida, Dr. Moulay Tahar, Algeria

Corresponding Author: nadoushben@gmail.com

Asma Rahmani

Batna 1 University, Algeria

Corresponding Author: asma.rahmani@univ-batna.dz

Abstract

In translating taboos, the translator considers the literary text's culture and language. Taboo language is a part of the cultural dimensions of a given society and forms an integral part of the translated text. The translator faces difficulties translating the cultural dimensions of the target society in general and taboos in particular. The current paper attempts to shed light on translating taboos from French into Arabic by taking Ben Jelloun's *La Nuit Sacrée* as a case in point. It also outlines whether the translation process may reduce the impact of these taboos. The study results indicated that taboos did not separate from the translation of literary texts. It found that the translation process does not reduce the impact and power of taboo words. The analysis also revealed that the translator did not fail to translate taboos from French to Arabic. Still, it is the ideology of the writer who tends to follow the Western standards in writing about his culture and representing its taboos.

Keywords: Aesthetic effect, Ben Jelloun's *La Nuit Sacrée*, cultural dimensions, literary translation, taboos

Introduction

There is a profound and intimate relationship between language and culture. This relationship is apparent when the translator tends to translate issues linked to culture. Indeed, culture is an aspect of language. On the other hand, taboos are *culture-specific*, i.e., they form an integral part of what is forbidden in a given society. They are rooted in the socio-cultural background of society. Henceforth, the translator must first understand the cultural background of the society in order to accurately translate the language and interpret its taboos and cultural norms.

Studies have shown that there are translation problems regarding the socio-cultural traditions, word choice, and the use of artful language that the translator always regards as stumbling blocks in translation. Another point presented here is that translators are always aware that taboos lose their strength when translated into another language. Besides, it is the translator who can feel the cultural differences between the translated pieces of work. However, he is not supposed to take into account how euphemisms and taboos are presented in both cultures. The current paper focuses on the challenges that the translator faces in

translating Tahar Ben Jelloun's "*La Nuit Sacrée*" into Standard Arabic. To reach this aim, the following research questions are set as follows:

- What are the challenges facing the translator in translating *La Nuit Sacrée* into Arabic?
- Did the translator succeed in translating taboos linked to female sexuality?

As a roadmap to the present research work, the reader will be introduced to euphemisms, taboos, and translation, then to taboos existing in Moroccan society.

Literature Review

Taboos in Literary Context

To better understand the use of taboos in literary works, it is essential to discuss how this term has been introduced into the English language. Indeed, the term taboo represents the customs and traditions of a given society, and how it prohibits the use of certain acts, topics, or words. The word first appeared in the language of Polynesia and was brought to the English language by Captain James Cook in 1771.

One might also observe that the perception of the word differs from one society to another, depending on the component of its culture. Moreover, taboo represents the negative attitudes of society's members against those who challenge societal boundaries. Besides, most of the taboos existing in all societies revolve around sexuality. In terms of Western societies, their attitudes toward sexual transgressions have changed during the 20th century. This fact helps writers to use taboo words, talk about taboo topics, and discuss sexuality.

In effect, the freedom to use taboos in literature leads to censorship. This means that readers are pushed away from this genre of literature since it is considered a threat to society's norms. It is Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which was first banned even in Modernism. The work is followed by Voltaire's *Candide*¹. However, these pieces are not the only ones that are prohibited. Defoe's *Moll Flanders* is another work, which raises much censorship among the American people. As expected, Defoe observes that the main aim behind using a language related to the morality of a society is to insert sexual pleasure as the most banned topic. Moreover, James Joyce is another taboo-breaker, as evident in *Ulysses*, which explores the use of taboo words. Of course, Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was banned and seen as a pornographic work until the 1960s, although it was translated into other languages. The main reason is the use of sexual scenes, which aim to shed light on the nature of pure sex and are separated from real love, and are considered part of male domination. This view is reinforced by the following statement by Pîrnuță and Sumănaru (2012):

One of the purposes of D.H. Lawrence's fiction is to raise awareness of the necessity to speak openly, honestly, and freely about sex. That is why he can be considered a road-opener for the mentality that we, the modern people, have today. (p. 145)

They added that Lawrence's works cannot be regarded as part of pornographic literature, since they represent sexual pleasure, which lacks pure feelings. Indeed, Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* represents a relationship built on pure love that does not need sexual intercourse. Up till this point, Pîrnuță and Sumănaru considered the novel as part of eroticism.

Henceforth, one might argue that taboos have taken a significant part in literature since they tackle the hidden problems of society. However, the topics have changed from dealing with illegal marriage and adultery to incest, rape, female sexuality, and homosexuality. These themes concern modern society and have constituted essential ingredients in erotic literature.

In light of these expectations, it is essential to expound on the idea further and confirm that, since literature is linked to censorship, taboos are taken from daily communication and are considered a part of social transgression. This transgression is placed in literature by novelists and poets as an indirect attack on societal norms and traditions. Its types, however, are the same and are connected with the plot and characters' behaviors. According to Allan and Burridge (2006), there are five types of taboos, linked to society, and appear in its language, whether in daily speech or written form, that is, literary discourse. These taboos include fatal and natural taboos.

In light of the previous standpoints, one may divide taboos into two types: fatal and natural taboos. Fatal taboos are related to subjects that are the most sensitive and are deeply related to religious prohibitions. These restrictions act as red lines that did not pass. Tied to this idea, Akbari and Shahnazari (2015) pinpointed that "Taboo words act like the flamboyant material which causes to shimmer in the human's eyes" (p. 491). In Islamic traditions, Akbari and Shahnazari added that adultery is the most taboo topic, and if a female commits sexual intercourse, she will be sanctioned by death.

Seemingly, a fatal taboo is rooted in each society's culture and is built first on its people's beliefs and traditions. This means that "fatal taboos are completely culture-bound, and they show the people's beliefs or creeds of the special region of the world"(Akbari & Shahnazari, 2015, p. 491). Touching on these themes may raise society's anger. For this reason, these topics are handled with more care even in literature. To be more specific, sexuality and other subjects, such as adultery, illegal sexual intercourse, masturbation, homosexuality, and menstruation, constitute the significant focus of sociologists, sociolinguists, and novelists.

In light of what was discussed before, it is noteworthy to expound on the statement and add that the previous topics have a deeper relationship with the physical appearance and sexual organs of people. For this reason, they were preserved by the cultural rules and norms of society. Akbari and Shahnazari (2015) have related menstruation, masturbation, adultery, and homosexuality to uncleanness taboos. These types form a vital place in fatal taboos, which are harshly judged by society. Menstruating women, for instance, cannot enter sacred places such as a mosque, or a church for Muslims, and Orthodox Christians, unless they clean themselves (Akbari & Shahnazari, 2015).

As far as adultery is concerned, one might confirm that it has remained the central focus of authors, novelists, and poets from the dawn of literature. In effect, most critics agree that adultery is related to female characters. For this reason, related works in fiction have been harshly criticized, as in the case of Connie Reid in Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hence, it is assumed that the purity of women is an

essential axis in society's tradition. This means that in many communities, females are considered society's property (Akbari & Shahnazari, 2015).

When it comes to how lesbianism is represented in novels, one should bear in mind that it has seen its dawn with Black American feminism during the 1980s, and Black lesbian literature through the exploration of *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980), *Zami*, and *The Color Purple* (Meyer, 2000). Keeping this in focus, Meyer observed that literature tries to define lesbianism as a topic and the language forms used by lesbian groups. On his part, Zimmerman (1990) gave some features that characterize such a genre in the following lines:

A lesbian novel has a central, not marginal lesbian character (...); it revolves primarily around lesbian histories. A lesbian novel also places love between women, including sexual passion, at the center of its story (...); unlike Heterosexual feminist literature (...) a lesbian novel places men firmly at the margins of the story. (p. 15)

Most novels treat the subject as a problem that is solved to protect the natural relationship between men and women. In *Crush* (1981), Fitcher describes lesbianism as a psychological problem that characterizes a homophobic society (Younger, 2009).

Having briefly mentioned the different types of taboos, it is now essential to state that taboos appear in literature as a type of transgression, since the more society restricts some areas, the more power is involved. In this sense, Cohen provides a comprehensive point stating that it is society and its rules that work "to suppress something, to make it taboo (the compression), the more power that thing will acquire, the more attractive the transgression (the explosion) of that taboo will be" (Cohen, 2001, p. 81). From his perspective, suppression is employed in discourse. He further pinpoints that this act makes this type of speech more desirable.

On the other hand, novelists try to avoid speaking openly about sexuality and tend to employ euphemistic strategies to avoid criticism and social abuse of society, like the case of Victorian writers, who violated the morals of Victorian society. According to Allen and Burridge (2006), euphemisms are used as strategies in Victorian novels and poetry to avoid censorship when tackling the subject of sexuality. They refer to this type of euphemism as "artful euphemism," which is employed "to expound taboo topics publicly, yet at the same time pretend to disguise that purpose" (p. 220). This means that the sociocultural milieu of this society obliges writers to resort to the use of euphemisms when dealing with the topic of sexuality. In other words, it is used as a tool to hide the effect of linguistic taboos and to show how writers try to challenge the social structure of British society indirectly, or through a hidden language. However, with the emergence of late Victorian writers, such as Lawrence, "a new effort to constrain sexuality" started to emerge, as pointed out by Stearns (2009, p. 88). The emergence of the new wave of writers, whose works have become a form of resistance, helps in the rise of oppressors who seek to undermine the structure of Victorian society. However, these writers cannot free themselves from the use of euphemism, but they employ it as a surface to tackle the topic of sexuality.

Taboos form essential parts of each society's culture and serve as necessary ingredients in fiction. In other words, the central focus of novelists is to tackle forbidden

subjects to understand more the effect of taboos on human interaction and behavior, and therefore to explore more what is hidden in the human psyche. However, they also tend to use veiled language, feeling that it touches the components of society, which may raise the anger of its members; consequently, they resort to employing euphemisms.

Taboos in Moroccan Novels

Violating taboos has become an essential character of Moroccan literature, in particular, and Maghrebian Francophone libertine fiction. According to Orlando (2009), this literature “interrogates the conscience of Moroccan society.” Its authors desire to break away from the burden of family and tradition” (p. 107). Consequently, violating taboos in Maghreb fiction goes beyond what Middle Eastern writers try to explore. In effect, investigating gender issues, love, women’s dress, and work has become old-fashioned in Moroccan fiction. Novelists have turned their attention toward sexuality and its significant topics, such as marital sex, homosexuality, and lesbianism.

At first blush, it is necessary to inform that Rachid is the first Francophone Maghrebian author who paved the way for other Moroccan novelists to talk about homosexuality in the Arab world and Maghreb Society in particular. For this reason, his works are banned in most Islamic countries and even in France, but nowadays they can be found in all French libraries. Indeed, they represent an accurate image of the status of sexuality and gender in Morocco, such as in *L’Enfant ébloui*, through which he indirectly declares his state as a homosexual writer. According to Orlando (2009), the major topics presented in his novels “explore the many stratifications that exist in contemporary Moroccan society caused by patriarchy and tradition, family and clan” (p. 113).

From this perspective, it is also worth noting that most Arab writers, in general, and Moroccan authors, in particular, are interested in distinguishing between “literary production and non-normative sexualities in the Maghreb (and indeed other Arab-Muslim regions)” (Ncube, 2014, p. 477). Tied to this idea, one should also assert that this distinction springs from their desire to talk about their life experiences. For this reason, the works of Rachid O, Taia, and Ben Jelloun are considered a part of what is called *auto-fiction*.

Although Moroccan writers treat the subject of homosexuality openly, they are cautious towards female sexuality, or they deal with it explicitly, as in the case of Nedjma's *The Almond*, in which the novelist shows the sexual relationship between the protagonist Badra, her cousin Noura, and her schoolmate Hazima. In the light of this idea, Détézaverevered the following statement:

In the novels of Arab women, sexual relationships among women are depicted with varying degrees of explicitness. In Djébar's *femme d'Alger dans leur appartement*, same-sex desire is suggested. Still, it is explicit in *L'amande* in which Badra and her cousin Noura, Badra and her schoolmate Hazima, Driss' grandmother, and Mabrouka, Najat, and Saloua all display same-sex desire. (As cited in Hosford&Wojtkowski, 2010, p. 219)

In the guise of conclusion, what characterizes this type of literature attracts Maghrebian female writers who are more enhanced by female sexuality and identity than male authors.

Marginal Sexuality through the French Language

Marginal sexuality is not a new theme in Arabic literature, dating back to the poems of Abu Nawas. By the 20th century, this fiction had witnessed a decrease in the number of literary works that treat subjects related to marginal sexuality. However, some Maghrebian Francophone authors have taken the limelight of this type of fiction, such as Rachid Boudjadra, Assia Djabar, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Rachid O, Abdellah Taia, Eyet Chekib Djaziri, and others. What characterizes their works is that they choose to write using French, as the language through which they explore marginal sexuality. Although there are many cultural differences, these novelists try to link both languages. The central factor is that there is a relationship between language and sexuality, as attested by Cameron and Kulick (2003) in their book *Language and Sexuality*, that “our ideas about sex are bound up with the language we use to define and talk about it” (p. ix).

Most Francophone writers seek the appropriate language for various reasons, as previously explained. The first reason is that taboos may have less power when they are expressed in another language. In contrast, some critics have connected their attitudes toward employing French to the fact that the Arabic dialect is poor in expressions related to marginal sexualities such as female heterosexuality, male homosexuality, and masturbation. In this respect, Ncube (2014) contended that “The Process of arriving at the choice of language of expression is contentious because had they chosen to write in Arabic,” however, “it would have been insuperably difficult given the lack of vocabulary and terminology to describe queer sexuality and experiences” (p. 90).

Francophone writers attempt to expose what is hidden in Arabic culture. In the view of Kharraz (2009), the Arabic language is sacred because it is the language of the Quran; for this reason, they prefer to employ another code. This view can be better understood from his speech:

La langue française constitue pour certains écrivains de la nouvelle génération francophone maghrébine un moyen de dire ce qui est indicible dans la langue sacrée: l'arabe littéraire. (...) En conséquence, aborder le thème de l'homosexualité dans une langue étrangère semble la seule solution pour l'écrivain maghrébin. (As quoted in Ncube, 2014, p. 68)

On the other hand, some critics suggest that some writers use French as a means to criticize Islamic norms, as claimed by Tlatli (1998, pp. 301-302) that “leur relation à la langue Françaises'accompagne en effet d'une critique virulente contre la tradition Arabo-Islamique” (As quoted in Ncube, 2014, p. 68).

It is noteworthy to say that the French language and culture represent essential tools for authors who explore marginal sexuality because these two components have become a way for freedom and revolt against the conservative nature of the Arab-Islamic societies of North Africa.

Euphemisms, Taboos, and Translation

The interpretation of the literary text differs depending on the reader and their responses to the text. For this reason, translation differs because it is linked to the reading process. This means that the translator can play the role of a reader; therefore, he can interpret the text. Holding this view, Conde-Parrilla wrote:

Every reading is a unique act in which the text elicits different responses from the reader. Indeed, there are as many interpretations of a text as there are readings. Translating is both reading and interpreting. It reflects what the translator is and his circumstances, imposing his particular reading of the source text upon the readership of the target language version. (as cited in Ncube, 2014, p. 69)

This means a literary text can have many interpretations depending on its reading. The role of a translator is not just limited to translating the text but also to its reading and interpretation.

Translating sensitive topics has been regarded as a challenge for translators, as they cannot convey the exact meaning of the original words. In other terms, they lose their real meaning and strength (Gambier, 1997). Tied to this idea, Alavi, Karimnia, and Salehi Zadeh (2013) cited Dewaele's (2004) view, stating that "written foul language is more offensive than actual oral usage, so the translators asked to respect a certain sanctity attached to written discourse in culture" (p. 12289). This means that the translator should respect some rules when dealing with taboo words, especially in the cultural structure of the society. Likewise, Alavi et al highlighted that the translator should pay attention to syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors. Davoodi (2009) argued that translators are always seeking the best-translating strategy or a balancing strategy between the culture of the first language and what can be considered taboo in the second language. Davoodi also maintained that translation strategies are affected by several factors, including translation commission, stylistic norms, the text's policy, the readership, and the translator's ideology. Dewaele (2004) contended that the translator can search for alternatives to avoid using taboo words, whereas Robinson (1996) confirmed the fact that translation is directed by four strategies, mainly, censorship, substitution, taboo for taboo, and the use of euphemisms. In light of this idea, Parilla claimed that there are some points that the translator should take into account. In her view, "the translators tend to reduce the lexical variety and to replace the 'offensive' language with weaker expressions using a less taboo lexicon." She adds that some translators tend to "mistranslate expressions through ignorance of non-recognition of the meaning"(As cited in Ncube, 2014, p. 90).

As far as problems of translating taboos in literature are concerned, most translators focus on specific practices and translation mechanisms, which contain cultural restrictions that lead to the use of euphemistic strategies. However, translating from one language to another may influence the power of taboo words, as in the case of Francophone Literature.

It is essential to claim that translating sexual matters has become a cultural and political act that should be restricted. To avoid these obstacles, the translator should follow the appropriate devices. These problems have attracted the interest of many Arab critics since translating a literary text from French to Standard Arabic may not keep the same meaning

and power of words. In short, the process of translation should take into account the socio-cultural background of the target language and the exact devices that the translator should work with to preserve the real meaning of words.

In conclusion, sexual matters have always been treated with fear and sensitivity, although language is the medium used to express hidden sexual desires. These desires are restricted by the customs and norms of society. The depiction of sexuality is known as a controversial topic in Classical, Modern Arabic, and English literature. Furthermore, most novels, especially in English literature, philosophically treat sex topics. However, any attempt to express sexuality in literature started between the 1960s and 1970s.

Strategies to Translate Taboos

According to Davoodi (2009), various strategies exist for translating taboos from one language to another. These strategies are divided into the following:

- *Censorship*: Through this strategy, the translator neglects the taboo word and its censor in the target language. However, this strategy is not always workable, especially if the taboo word is a critical concept in the original text.
- *Substitution*: This strategy involves substituting a word with another word that has a similar meaning. However, this strategy is not always good since the substitution may confuse the reader in the target language.
- *Taboo to taboo*: This strategy involves translating the taboo word to its taboo word in the target language, although the society does not accept that language.

Davoodi added that there are factors governing the translation of taboos as follows:

- *Subject matter*: Sometimes the translator feels obliged to retain the meaning of a taboo word, as taboos are often employed to convey jokes, so the translator should use the same taboo term.
- *Situation*: Some taboos are taboo in certain situations and neutral words in some contexts. For example, the word “breast” is seen as a taboo topic linked to female body parts. It is a neutral word when discussed in medicine.
- *Religious differences*: Some topics are taboo in some religions and neutral in other religions, like the issue of calling Allah. It is taboo in the Jewish faith to call God, while it is not in Islam.
- *Readers’ social class*: Some topics are taboo according to the readers’ social class.

Analysis

Translating Sexuality in La Nuit Sacrée

Ben Jelloun bears on his shoulders the task of exploring sexuality and how it is represented in Maghreb Society, in particular, and the Arab world, in general. His major concerns revolve around unveiling the suppressed emotions of Muslim characters through scouting themes of love and sexuality, namely female sexuality, and the violence surrounding men’s and women’s relationships. Indeed, all these subjects should be handled with more care regarding translation.

After winning the prize, *La Nuit Sacrée* was translated into forty languages, among which was Arabic. According to Faiq (2005), *La Nuit Sacrée* was translated in the same year of its publication and has appeared in a series called *the Return of the Text*. However, this translation has caused many contradictions because it is not a literal translation of the French words, as the following extract written by Mehrez (1992, p. 128):

This Arabic translation is not a literal translation of the French words, which remain alien to the cultural referent provided by the Arabic sign. The bilingual reader, however, is bound to make these necessary translations as soon as he or she begins to read the French text. If anything, therefore, the French title (of the original) fails to translate the Arabic subtext in which the entire work is grounded. (As cited in Faiq, 2005, p. 68)

Interpreting the above passage reveals that Mehrez assumes the French text fails to convey the actual value of the title and remains unfamiliar to the heritage of Arabic literature. However, Ben Jelloun strives to mix Western models and Arabic narrative techniques.

Even though the translated form has been harshly criticized, Faiq (2005) insisted on the idea that translation is not the problem, but it is the ideology that the writer has followed to write his novel in the target language. Faiq further emphasized that it is the fault of Arab writers, who “have opted to walk into the strait jacket the West had cut for them,” and have created their particular ideology that sees “the native lands and people of these authors as unequal and as a dark spot in history and world culture and literature” (p. 72). He further argued that other translators, namely, those of the Western world, take these stereotypes to give a wrong view of Islam.

On the other hand, many critics agree that the translator Shargi in *La Nuit Sacrée* effectively captures the presented themes and attempts to demonstrate how Zahra experiences her new personality and sexuality as a means of liberation. In essence, Shargi succeeds in selecting the best expressions that represent the socio-cultural background of females in Maghreb Society. He also discloses the complexities that Zahra faces, how she tries to overcome societal constraints, and how she regains her lost female character through practicing sexuality. Besides, among the difficulties faced by the translator in the novel is the question of gender because Ben Jelloun thinks it is a social construction. For this reason, it will be difficult to understand why Zahra considered prostitution as a way of liberation. Thus, the translator fails to explain that the heroine’s double identity is constructed in the language used by Ben Jelloun in *The Sand Child*, which produces many challenges for translators (Sardin in Ncube, 2014).

On the whole, the translation version of *La Nuit Sacrée* exhibits how Ben Jelloun treats his heroines in all his novels, like *La Nuit d’erreur* and *Harrouda*, although he does not give them a respectable position in their society. He attempts to display how females suffer from the cultural restrictions that society imposes on them.

The analysis shows that most translated taboo words follow the *subject matter factor*, as they are used as they are translated without affecting their meanings, since the cultural

background of both the original and the target text is similar. The following table gives an overview of the translated taboo words:

Table 1. *Translated taboo words in La Nuit Sacrée*

Taboo words	Times	Page Number	Meaning in English
الغواية	1	37	The lure
الوركين	3	47-48	The hips
نهديهها	5	34-47-60-68-98	her breasts
قدالي	1	47	My nipples
الجنس	1	48	Sex
فخدين	1	58	Thighs
ثديها	3	69-98	Her breasts
الرغبة	1	69	The desire
ردفيها	5	48-97-98	Buttocks
الشهوة	6	36-98-101-106-125	The lust
الرغبة	3	42-106	He desires
قحبة	1	109	A prostitute
المتعة	5	36-69-99-125	The joy
الحب	3	84-97-98	Love
الحبيبة	1	51	Sexual partner
القبلات	1	51	Kisses
المداعبات	1	51	Tickles
منيه	1	94	His semen
بدرى	1	125	Clitoris
حشرجاته	2	99	A sound after reaching orgasm

Table one shows that most translated words taken from Standard Arabic, except for the word "قحبة" (prostitute), were included from Moroccan Arabic to have more power. In this case, the translator employed a taboo-to-taboo strategy. The main aim of the translator is to translate the taboos as they are, since the socio-cultural background of the writer and the translator is the same. The analysis also revealed that the translator did not fail to translate taboos from French to Arabic. Still, it is the ideology of the writer who tends to follow the Western standards in writing about his culture and representing its taboos.

Conclusion

The current paper focuses on the process and the challenges facing the translator in translating *La Nuit Sacrée* from French to the Arabic Language. The study confirmed that

many factors affect translation, mainly the socio-cultural background of the target society and the context in which the taboo is used. The study also found that the translator employed the taboo-to-taboo strategy since the socio-cultural backgrounds of the writer and the translator were the same. The question that raises itself for further research is, “What are the strategies employed to translate a text where the writer belongs to the society of the target language?”

Endnotes

- 1 It was banned in the United States during the 1930s.
- 2 The story revolves around the main character and her marriage to her brother.
- 3 *The Women of Brewster Place* is written by Gloria Naylor, *Zami* by Audre Lorde, and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

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