

Aesthetics of Transfer: Recreating Function in the Translation of *Melhoun*

^{1*}Wassila Guemache, Tahar Belahia²

^{1*} Translation Institute of Oran, University of Oran I Ahmed Ben Bella,
Oran, Algeria

² Translation Institute of Oran, University of Oran I Ahmed Ben Bella,
Oran, Algeria

Received: 11/06/2025, Revised: 28/08/2025, Accepted: 27/09/2025

Abstract

This article examines a complex form of translation: rendering texts that convey imagination, a metaphorical worldview, a culturally specific lexicon, and intense emotion. The translation of Maghrebi popular poetry—especially Melhoun—poses singular challenges. Its language teems with images, symbols, formulaic expressions, and affect that resist straightforward transfer. Rather than treating poetry as untranslatable, this study analyzes the semantic and phraseological stakes specific to Melhoun and sketches translation strategies that aim to recreate both sense and effect. Our approach combines stylistic analysis, the study of fixed expressions, and reflection on cultural transfer. The goal is to show that poetic translation, though necessarily imperfect, remains possible when it targets the original text's aesthetic and emotional function.

Keywords: Melhoun ; poetic translation ; Maghrebi popular poetry ; phraseology ; cultural transfer ; stylistic analysis ; semantic fields ; emotion in translation ; aesthetic function

1. Introduction

Poetry is often declared untranslatable. This verdict, reiterated for familiar reasons—metaphorical density, rhythm, symbolism, emotional charge—risks denying both the translator’s creativity and the universality of human feeling. Melhoun, a Maghrebi popular poetry rooted in oral tradition, crystallizes the tension between cultural singularity and shared affects.

Our objective is to examine the fixed expressions and phraseological patterns that carry beliefs, superstitions, and worldviews in Melhoun, and to analyze the challenges of translating them. Drawing on concrete motifs (the djinn, exile, malediction), we propose an analytical grid to systematize a translation approach.

2. Methodological Framework

The study is based on a corpus of qas̄idas attributed to Mohamed Ben Ismaïl, Belkacem El Bourachedi, and Taïbi Ali. For each passage, we consider its French rendering (where available) and discuss phraseology, cultural context, and poetic constraints. The aim is not only to convey meaning but to preserve the Melhoun’s aesthetic and emotional effect, seeking a balance between linguistic fidelity and poetic re-creation.

3. Maghrebi Popular Literature: Transmission, Symbolism, and Translational Complexity

The Maghreb sustains a remarkably vibrant literary tradition, rich in imagination, popular beliefs, and superstition. Transmitted since remote times and shaped by contact with multiple civilizations, this tradition has been studied primarily from ethnographic and historical angles, but also from linguistic ones. Yet the versions available to us—often mediated by translations of uneven quality—struggle to render the nuances of imagery, allusive delicacy, and specifically Maghrebi tones in poems, tales, and legends [1].

This body of work constitutes an invaluable resource for sociologists, folklorists, ethnographers, and linguists concerned with the origins of rites and concepts. Proper evaluation of a popular poem requires re-examining the complete original text—no simple task. Tradition erodes when not maintained. A first step would be extensive documentary research to gather as many poems, tales, and legends as possible (ideally reported by specialists who understand the subtleties of traditional narration). Once such an encyclopedic effort is complete, one could analyze the documents in their original dialects to identify the specific traits of the popular genius that produced them, prior to translation. Contrary to the cliché that “popular” equals simple, many texts are not easily accessible to a general reader. The primary difficulty is not always vocabulary but arises from symbolism, poetic imagery, and latent meaning. These complexities signal not pedantry but the richness of a production where “popular” does not reduce to “vulgar”; indeed, part of this literature can justly be called learned.

4. The Primacy of Effect, Style, and Balance in Poetic Transfer

The translation at stake here—poetic discourse—brings aesthetic and sonic constraints, syntactic play, a strongly metaphorical vision, and heightened emotion. Losses are, to some extent, inescapable. Many authors consider poetic translation an art rather than a codifiable science. Any

serious reflection must foreground the specificity of the task and the characteristics of the discourse to be translated [8].

Poetry, a source of pleasure and emotion, is often defined by how it functions: it communicates impressions and provokes feelings, not merely information. Words carry symbolic power beyond their “natural” range; images and figures are charged with meanings that reshape the world. Translating poetry therefore requires more than conveying sense—it entails translating style, aesthetics, and affect, rooted in formal beauty and psychological depth.

While we recognize the difficulty, dismissing poetic translation as futile would be misguided. Some scholars treat emotion—especially literary emotion—as a field of inquiry in its own right. Ethnologists Izard and Buechler, for instance, identify foundational universal emotions [3]. Terms denoting emotion encode distinct conceptualizations shaped, among other factors, by culture and best approached through rigorous semantic analysis. Perceptions of feeling can differ across cultures; hence some claim emotions are “unique” and untranslatable. Yet however intractable an emotion may seem, semantic explication offers a viable path for transfer.

Returning to Melhoun: despite its distinctive features, instincts shared by human beings enable them to grasp one another’s experiences. Steiner argues that humanity shares underlying structures and that language rests on universal foundations [11]. Linguistic differences are superficial; translation exists because cross-idiomatic recognition is possible. Etkind characterizes poetic translation as a matter of balance [4]: the translator should strive to recreate the effect perceived in the source. García Yebra goes further, suggesting even an author cannot fully “grasp” the entirety of their own message [6]. Complete reproduction is impossible, but translation remains both possible and legitimate. The outcome depends on the translator’s expressive capacity—their best ally in demonstrating poetry’s translatability. The aim is to reproduce the source text’s particular function. Messages must be apprehended alongside the elements that configure them—sensitivity, imagination, words, rhythms, metaphors. Since these features produce effects, reproducing sense alone is insufficient.

5. Stylistic Studies

Stylistics draws on linguistics and rhetoric to illuminate textual function and systems of expressivity. Specialists attend to both form and meaning. In 1970, F. Miko, in “The Theory of Expression and Translation,” identified core elements of a stylistic approach: the translator should preserve a text’s expressive value—its distinctive style—and compensate whenever direct substitution is impossible.

P. Faber argues that translating poetry demands considerable effort: the goal is not simply to carry over the message but also “the exact linguistic and stylistic resources which have been used to communicate it” [5]. Reproduction must account for the target language’s resources. In the tradition of Peter Newmark, Faber holds that with strongly expressive texts the translator must focus on the source language and the author’s intention. Translation begins with “an exhaustive analysis of [the text’s] meaning as transmitted by stylistic resources on the syntactic and semantic levels” [5].

6. Critical and Literary Studies

Translation conceived as the product of literary analysis cannot be reduced to linguistic transfer. It requires immersion in an author's world; every text is inseparable from its conditions of production, its era, and creative trajectory. A critical approach asks the translator to engage not only metaphors, images, and figures but also the author's biographical and cultural dimensions that infuse the writing with resonance.

R. Maisonneuve captures this demand by likening the translator's approach to a love relationship: a long, deep journey of contemplating the text, testing its sonorities, and questioning its rhythms—like a young lover gradually discovering the loved one [9]. The metaphor aptly conveys the patience and attentiveness required by translation as critical practice.

From this perspective, translation becomes hermeneutic: interpreting the work beyond its surface, reading the choices of writing for their aesthetic weight. The translator, as critical reader and sensitive interpreter, avoids superficial literalism and attends instead to internal rhythms, sonic echoes, images, and cultural allusions that compose the poetic texture. In short, translating within a critical-literary frame means coupling technical skill with artistic sensitivity—handling motifs, style, tone, and historical context while preserving the aesthetic and emotional life of the text. Only then can translation claim to deliver not merely meanings but a poetic experience.

7. Phraseology, Culture, and Translation

“Every act of translation unfolds in an intercultural space where expressions specific to different languages acquire comparable semantic value through shared cultural and linguistic practices” [12].

Research on fixed expressions has proven essential, given their frequency, yet they pose a central problem: their direct bond to culture. If they mirror culture, how should that dimension be integrated to produce a satisfactory translation? Mastery of a language entails mastery of its culture, necessarily including phraseology. This competence far exceeds phonology, syntax, and lexicon; it cannot be reduced to inventories. Even native speakers are not always conscious of their language's idiomaticity, a blind spot that often leads to translation errors (Vaguer, 2012).

Accordingly, phraseology is crucial both theoretically (semantic, grammatical, and lexical rules) and practically (teaching, language learning, lexicography). We highlight this subdiscipline in relation to the imagination, superstitions, and beliefs embedded in Maghrebi Melhoun poetry.

The diversity of fixed combinations reflects cultural richness: clichés, commonplaces, idioms, formulae, aphorisms, sayings, maxims, and proverbs—all carriers of memory—reveal a people's soul. Consider, for instance, a *qaṣīda* often translated as “The Mysterious Night Visitor” by Djilali Mtihi. A host invites a nocturnal visitor to share food and water; the exchange invokes the authority of a local saint (Sidi Abdelkader El Djilani, known as Boualem) as guarantor of the act's legitimacy. The point is not mere hospitality but a culturally rooted assurance grounded in religious imagination.

Similarly, fixed expressions may encode malediction or irony. In some communities, proverbial triads starkly oppose religious groups in an order of blessing and curse; in others, the same triad is inverted to favor another group. Such examples show that phraseology is never a purely

linguistic tool: it encodes identity positions, reflects sociolects, and exposes tensions or reversals of perspective within a shared society.

For the translator, lexical accuracy is not enough. A broad repertoire of fixed forms is a *sine qua non*, especially when discourse brims with cultural connotations. Just as crucial is an understanding of the target community's thought patterns and practices. Blessings and curses, references to saints, and other culturally saturated formulae pose a persistent question: can these be detached from their environment and re-inscribed in another language? Doing so requires identifying connotations and adapting them appropriately to the target context.

8. Exile in the Phraseology of Malediction

Exile figures prominently among the themes of malediction. In poetic sensibility—particularly in milieus marked by migration, deportation, or exodus—exile becomes a school of deracinated verse, a privileged frame for singing nostalgia for a country or homeland left behind.

In one *qaṣīda* often rendered as “Separation,” Mohamed Ben Ismaïl depicts the ordeal of exile with striking intensity: patience collapses, love becomes a crushing burden, and separation is personified as a military force besieging the speaker. Elsewhere, in a *qaṣīda* known by its incipit “Thoughts Stir,” Belkacem El Bourachedi narrates a feverish desire to see the homeland again, leaving Fes for the Atlantic coast en route to Salé; love is cast as a heat that drives a baggage-less departure. Finally, Taïbi Ali, after long adoration, turns to cursing the beloved: may she suffer exile's sleeplessness, tears, and burning torments as he does.

In each case, exile's phraseology binds affect to culturally inflected formulae—lament, oath, prayer, and curse—that shape how loss and longing are voiced. Translating these passages calls for balancing semantic clarity with the re-creation of emotive force and ritual tone (invocation, appeal to the divine, vows), even when direct equivalents are unavailable.

9. Synthesis and Conclusion

What Sylvie Germain (2005) calls “the nocturnal lover of reality”—the imaginary—is here the expression of thought and aesthetics forged in a specific cultural frame. Transferring such an imaginary across languages means recreating aesthetic value, an operation always constrained by re-expression and reformulation. The rhetorical features, polysemous images, and symbolic power of these poems confirm that poetic translation is multidimensional.

Poetic discourse differs from other forms through its plurality of language, generating communicative, cognitive, linguistic, and cultural challenges. To meet them, the translator must be animated by a poetic sensibility—poetry calls for poetry—while also undertaking linguistic and phraseological analysis.

The central problem is transposing the implicit and the cultural referents: how to render a text marked by allusion, understatement, and symbolism readable to a new audience? The translator navigates two reefs: explicating at the risk of distortion, or leaving implicit at the risk of readerly loss. Born of divergent linguistic and cultural systems, this dilemma lies at the heart of translating Melhoun and Maghrebi popular poetry.

10. References

- [1] Bouanani, A. (1966). Introduction à la poésie populaire marocaine. Souffles, 3.
- [2] Boudot-Lamotte, A. (1974). L'expression de la malédiction et de l'insulte dans les dialectes arabes maghrébins. Brill.
- [3] Christophe, V. (1998). Les Émotions. Presses Universitaires du Septentrion.
- [4] Etkind, E. (1982). Un art en crise. L'Âge d'Homme.
- [5] Faber, P. (1989). "Stylistic analysis in poetic translation." *Meta*, 34(4).
- [6] García Yebra, V. (1989). En torno a la traducción. Gredos.
- [7] Germain, S. (2005). Magnus. Albin Michel.
- [8] Khadraoui, S. (2003). "Pour une approche scientifique de la traduction poétique." *Revue des sciences humaines*, Université de Biskra.
- [9] Maisonneuve, R. (1978). "La musique du mot et du concept." *Meta*, 23(1).
- [10] Miko, F. (1970). The Nature of Translation. Mouton.
- [11] Steiner, G. (1987). Après Babel. Albin Michel.
- [12] Vaguer, C. (2014). Expressions figées et traduction. HAL.

Received: 11/06/2025, Revised: 28/08/2025, Accepted: 27/09/2025