

RETHINKING FIDELITY: TRANSLATION AS A TRANSFORMATIVE ACT IN POSTMODERN LITERARY HISTORY

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Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqola postmodern adabiyot va falsafa kontekstida tarjimaning transformativ tabiatini o‘rganadi. An’anaviy tarjima nazariyasining markaziy tushunchasi bo‘lgan “sodiqlik” tushunchasi Derrida, Benjamin va Barthes kabi postmodern nazariyotchilar tomonidan qanday qilib dekonstruksiya qilinishi tahlil qilinadi. Maqola, ayniqsa, xayoliy tarjima va tarjimonning muallif sifatidagi rolga e’tibor qaratib, Xorxe Luis Borxesning “Pierre Menard” hikoyasi orqali postmodern tarjima tamoyillarini yoritadi. Shuningdek, feministik tarjima nazariyasi va gender nuqtai nazaridan sodiqlik tushunchasining qayta talqini muhokama qilinadi. Tadqiqot shuni ko‘rsatadiki, postmodern yondashuv tarjimani hosilaviy (derivative) emas, balki transformativ akt sifatida qarashni taklif etadi va bu adabiy tarixni qayta yozish imkoniyatlarini ochadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: *postmodern tarjima nazariyasi, sodiqlik, dekonstruksiya, transformativ tarjima, mualliflik, intertekstuallik, feministik tarjima.*

Annotation

This article examines the transformative nature of translation within the context of postmodern literature and philosophy. It analyzes how the concept of “fidelity” - a central tenet of traditional translation theory - has been deconstructed by postmodern theorists such as Derrida, Benjamin, and Barthes. The article particularly focuses on Jorge Luis Borges's story “Pierre Menard” as an illustration of postmodern translation principles, emphasizing fictional translation and the translator's role as author. Additionally, feminist translation theory and the reinterpretation of fidelity from a gender perspective are discussed. The research



demonstrates that the postmodern approach proposes viewing translation not as a derivative but as a transformative act, opening possibilities for rewriting literary history.

Key words: *postmodern translation theory, fidelity, deconstruction, transformative translation, authorship, intertextuality, feminist translation.*

Introduction.

The concept of fidelity has long occupied a central position in translation theory, serving as the primary criterion for evaluating the success or failure of a translated work. From Cicero's admonition against word-for-word translation to the Renaissance humanists' quest for faithful reproduction of classical texts, the notion that a translation should remain "true" to its original has persisted across centuries of Western translation discourse [Teshaboyeva, 2021: 47]. However, the advent of postmodern thought in the latter half of the twentieth century has fundamentally challenged this paradigm, calling into question the very assumptions upon which traditional notions of fidelity rest.

Postmodern philosophy, with its skepticism toward grand narratives, stable meanings, and fixed identities, has opened new avenues for understanding translation not as a derivative act of reproduction but as a creative, transformative process. As Niu [2017: 686] observes, postmodern philosophy is characterized by "the emphasis on the negative, non-central, anti-orthodox, uncertain, and diversified concepts," which has profound implications for how we conceptualize the relationship between source and target texts. This article explores the ways in which postmodern thought has reconfigured our understanding of translation, focusing particularly on the deconstruction of fidelity and the emergence of translation as a transformative act within literary history.

The thesis advanced here is that postmodern translation theory, rather than simply abandoning the concept of fidelity, fundamentally reimagines it - moving from a model of correspondence to one of creative transformation. Drawing on the works of key theorists and examining exemplary texts such as Jorge Luis Borges's



“Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” this article demonstrates how postmodern approaches to translation reveal the inherently intertextual and generative nature of all literary production.

The deconstruction of fidelity in postmodern thought.

The postmodern critique of fidelity in translation finds its philosophical grounding in the deconstructive project of Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s challenge to what he termed “logocentrism” - the belief in a stable, transcendent meaning existing outside language - undermines the foundational assumption of traditional translation theory: that there exists an original meaning to which the translation must remain faithful. If, as Derrida argues, meaning is not fixed but is produced through the endless play of signification, then the notion of fidelity to an original becomes philosophically untenable [Simon, 1996: 12].

Derrida's concept of *différance* - the endless deferral of meaning - has particular resonance for translation studies. As Joz and Pirnajmuddin [2018: 65] note in their comparative study of Benjamin and Borges, postmodern and poststructuralist theories have demonstrated that translation is “neither inferior to the other intertextual undertakings such as writing, nor is it detached from language as post-structurally conceived”. The translation, from this perspective, does not merely reproduce but participates in the ongoing production of meaning, extending and transforming the textual energies of the so-called “original.”

Walter Benjamin's influential essay “The Task of the Translator” anticipates many of these postmodern insights. Benjamin’s conception of translation as the “afterlife” (*Überleben*) of a text rejects the model of fidelity in favor of a more organic, transformative relationship between original and translation. For Benjamin, the translation does not serve the original but rather fulfills its latent potentialities, revealing aspects of the source text that remain invisible in its native language. This notion of afterlife implies that the original itself is not a closed, complete entity but rather an open field of meaning that achieves its full realization only through translation [Joz and Pirnajmuddin, 2018: 68].



The postmodern critique of fidelity extends beyond philosophical deconstruction to engage with questions of power and ideology. Feminist translation theorists have been particularly attentive to the gendered dimensions of fidelity discourse. The French aphorism “les belles infidèles” - beautiful, unfaithful women/translations -explicitly links the expectation of fidelity in translation to patriarchal demands for female chastity and submission [Post45, 2022]. As one scholar notes, “An unfaithful translator, similarly, takes advantage of their unique position to perform multiple betrayals: of their audience, the author, the country, of the language itself”. Feminist translation practice, from this perspective, involves a conscious rejection of such gendered expectations, embracing instead what Sherry Simon [1996: 27] calls “the conditions of textual production” that enable translators to foreground female subjectivity and challenge patriarchal literary traditions.

Borges and the invention of postmodern translation.

No writer has more vividly illustrated the postmodern reconceptualization of translation than the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. His 1939 story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” stands as a foundational text for postmodern translation theory, offering a brilliant fictional demonstration of how translation can function as creative transformation rather than mere reproduction [Joz and Pirnajmuddin, 2018: 71].

The story’s protagonist, the fictional French symbolist Pierre Menard, undertakes the project of writing Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quixote—not by copying or translating it in any conventional sense, but by producing a text that coincides, word for word, with Cervantes’s seventeenth-century masterpiece. Menard’s version, however, is not a copy; it is a new work, inflected by the historical and cultural context of its twentieth-century composition. As Borges’s narrator observes, Menard’s text is “more subtle” than Cervantes’s, despite being verbally identical, because it reflects the accumulated history of the three centuries separating the two compositions.

The Borgesian parable deconstructs several binaries central to traditional translation theory: original versus copy, author versus translator, production versus reproduction. If a text can be verbally identical to another yet meaningfully distinct,



then the source-target hierarchy collapses. The translator, like Menard, emerges not as a secondary figure but as a creator in his own right, whose work participates in the ongoing construction of literary meaning. As Ivashkiv [2015: 45] argues in his study of transmesis in Slavic postmodernism, “solutions to the problem of untranslatability will be more plausible if translators, rather than striving for illusory sameness or similarity and being governed by adequacy and fidelity, approach their task as an intertextual and interpretative language game predicated on creative transformation”.

Borges’s influence extends beyond his fictional explorations of translation to shape contemporary translation theory more broadly. Recent scholarship has traced the Argentine writer’s impact on thinkers such as Harold Bloom, Abdelfattah Kilito, and feminist translation theorists. As Taylor & Francis Online [2025] notes, Borges’s work “deconstruct the time lag conceived in the binaries such as the work’s production vs. its criticism, the original text vs. its translation, the source text vs. the derivative nature of the target text”. The Borgesian model suggests that literary history itself operates through translation - a continuous process of rewriting, reinterpretation, and transformation in which no text stands as an absolute origin.

The translator as Co-performer: Postmodernist fiction and its challenges.

The translation of postmodernist fiction presents unique challenges that further illuminate the limitations of traditional fidelity discourse. Postmodernist texts, with their self-reflexivity, intertextuality, metafictional strategies, and deliberate blurring of authorial boundaries, resist conventional translation approaches predicated on stable meanings and clear authorial intentions.

Hashemi and Ghaffary [2026] introduce the concept of “performative authorship” to describe the distinctive features of postmodernist fiction, which “intentionally blur the boundaries between the real author, the constructed authorial identity (implied author), and the various narratorial voices within the narrative discourse”. Translating such texts requires more than linguistic competence; it demands what these scholars term “performative translation,” in which the translator



becomes a “co-performer” who must navigate the multilayered structural and thematic aspects of the source text.

The concept of the translator as co-performer resonates with broader postmodern rejections of authorial authority. Roland Barthes’s famous proclamation of the “death of the author” liberates the translator from the obligation to recover authorial intention, opening space for creative engagement with the text’s multiple possibilities of meaning. If, as Barthes argues, the unity of a text lies not in its origin but in its destination—the reader—then the translator, as the text’s first reader, necessarily participates in the production of meaning.

Postmodernist fiction’s emphasis on intertextuality further complicates traditional notions of fidelity. As Jaka Irizar [2023: 12] demonstrates in her study of Basque writer Joseba Sarrionandia, postmodern translation practice embraces “pseudo-translations, fictitious translators, mediating languages, variations and imitations, translations without originals” as legitimate strategies that correspond to postmodern theories of textuality. These practices reveal that all texts exist in a web of relationships with other texts, and translation is simply one modality of this intertextual dynamic.

Translation as transformative Act: Toward a new model.

The postmodern reconceptualization of translation as a transformative rather than derivative act has profound implications for how we understand literary history and cultural transmission. If, as the postmodern perspective suggests, translation does not simply transmit meaning but actively produces it, then translated texts must be understood as significant cultural interventions in their own right.

The Chinese scholar Li Chuanling [2009: 88] proposes “rational pluralism” (理性多元) as an alternative translation criterion to traditional fidelity, drawing on Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality. This approach suggests that translations should be evaluated not according to a single standard of correspondence but in terms of their “truthfulness to the objective world, rightness to the social world and sincerity to the subjective world”. Such a framework accommodates the multiple functions that translations serve in different contexts and



acknowledges that different translation strategies may be appropriate for different purposes.

The transformative model of translation has particular resonance for postcolonial and minoritized literatures. For writers working in languages that have been marginalized by global literary markets, translation becomes a means of intervention and cultural assertion. The translator's creative engagement with the source text can foreground aspects of the original that challenge dominant cultural narratives or introduce new aesthetic possibilities into the target language.

Don Mee Choi's work as a translator of Korean feminist poetry exemplifies this transformative approach. As one critic observes, Choi's translational politic involves a conscious refusal to "perpetuate the official narratives" and a determination to make visible the geopolitical conditions that shape literary production and reception [Post45, 2022]. Her translations do not aim for transparency or invisibility but rather foreground the translator's mediating role, asking readers to confront "the authoritative presence and hegemony of English".

Fidelity Reimagined: Ethical dimensions of transformative translation.

The postmodern rejection of traditional fidelity does not imply an abandonment of ethical responsibility in translation. Rather, it calls for a reimagining of what translational ethics might mean outside the framework of correspondence. If the translator is not bound to reproduce an original meaning, what ethical obligations remain?

One answer emerges from the hermeneutic tradition in translation studies, which emphasizes the translator's responsibility to the text's otherness. From this perspective, the ethical translator does not seek to master or domesticate the source text but rather to preserve its alterity, to make visible the differences that constitute it. This approach resonates with Lawrence Venuti's advocacy of foreignizing translation strategies that resist the violence of domestication and challenge the target culture's assumptions.

Another ethical dimension emerges from feminist and postcolonial translation theory, which emphasizes the translator's accountability to communities and



histories that have been marginalized or silenced. Sherry Simon's [1996: 79] work on gender in translation demonstrates how feminist translators can make visible the gendered dimensions of texts and challenge patriarchal assumptions embedded in both source and target languages. Similarly, postcolonial translation practice seeks to intervene in the unequal power relations that structure global literary exchange, using translation as a tool for cultural resistance and renewal.

These ethical frameworks suggest that the postmodern translator's freedom is not absolute but is constrained by commitments to the text's otherness, to marginalized communities, and to the transformative possibilities of cross-cultural encounter. The rejection of fidelity as correspondence opens space for fidelity understood as responsiveness—a dynamic engagement with the source text that honors its complexity and its potential for generating new meanings in new contexts.

Conclusion.

The postmodern reconceptualization of translation as a transformative act represents one of the most significant developments in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century translation theory. By challenging the philosophical assumptions underlying traditional notions of fidelity, postmodern thinkers have opened new possibilities for understanding translation's role in literary history and cultural production.

The deconstructive critique of stable meaning, the Borgesian celebration of the translator as creator, the feminist exposure of fidelity's gendered dimensions, and the postcolonial insistence on translation's political stakes all converge on a common insight: translation is not a secondary or derivative activity but a primary mode of literary production. Every translation transforms its source, extending and renewing the textual energies that constitute literary tradition.

This insight has profound implications for how we write literary history. If translation is understood as transformative rather than merely reproductive, then translated texts must be integrated into our accounts of literary development, recognized as significant interventions that shape the evolution of genres, styles, and cultural formations. The history of literature, from this perspective, is inseparable



from the history of translation-a continuous process of rewriting, reinterpretation, and renewal in which no text stands as an absolute origin and every text exists in relation to others.

The challenge for contemporary translation studies is to develop methodologies adequate to this understanding - approaches that can account for translation's transformative power without losing sight of the ethical responsibilities that attend cross-cultural mediation. This requires moving beyond both the naive fidelity of traditional discourse and the facile celebration of translational freedom, toward a nuanced understanding of translation as a site of encounter, negotiation, and creative transformation.

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