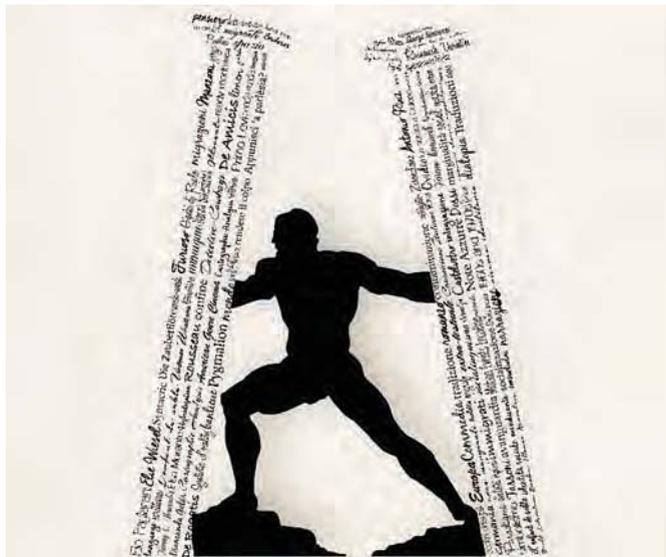




Università degli studi di Napoli
“L’Orientale”

DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI LETTERARI, LINGUISTICI E COMPARATI
DOTTORATO IN STUDI LETTERARI, LINGUISTICI E COMPARATI



Quaderni della ricerca - 2

In limine

Forme marginali e discorsi di confine / Fringe Forms and Border Discourses

A cura di/edited by

MARGHERITA DE BLASI, GIULIA IMBRIACO, FELICE MESSINA,
SALVATORE ORLANDO, VALENTINA SCHETTINO

NAPOLI
2018



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Comitato scientifico:

CARLO VECCE (coordinatore)

MARCELLO BARBATO

GUIDO CAPPELLI

MARIA CENTRELLA

ANNA DE MEO

VALENTINA DI ROSA

PAOLA GORLA

AUGUSTO GUARINO

DONATELLA IZZO

RITA LIBRANDI

SALVATORE LUONGO

ALBERTO MANCO

LORENZO MANGO

FRANCO PARIS

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SEZIONE 2: CONFINI TRA ARTI E CULTURE

Identità ibride e scritture dell'alterità

MARINA AGNELLI, CAMILLA BINASCO, ELENA OGLIARI

Breaking into the Boundaries of World Literature: Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'enfant de sable*¹

Abstract

The essay aims to analyze the novel *L'enfant de sable* (1985) – the first bestseller by the French-Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun – in the perspective of World Literature as underpinned by the theories of David Damrosch and Pascale Casanova. This theoretical approach illustrates to what extent the success of a literary work is the product of the intersection between its aesthetic value and the socio-economic dynamics governing the literary market. A global writer on the threshold of two worlds, Ben Jelloun concocts a hybrid work in which Persian-Arabic literary and cultural traditions melt together with their Western counterparts. In particular, *L'enfant de sable* is characterized by a multilayered hybridity for a strategy of negotiation between the two cultures is employed at many levels: narratological, intertextual and linguistic. This strategy of hybridity/negotiation may be deemed as a mere compromise to reach a larger readership. Indeed, analyzing the novel within this theoretical framework highlights its ambiguities: remarkably, the author has been accused of commodifying his own culture to create a product palatable to the Euro-American market and compliant with Westerners' expectations about the Arabic world – the topic appealing to French readers being the evidence of it. Yet, this reading also points out the novel's undeniable aesthetic value: Ben Jelloun succeeds in merging two traditions artfully while opening a window into recondite aspects of Moroccan culture.

Il presente articolo propone una lettura in prospettiva World Literature del primo romanzo di successo dell'autore franco-marocchino Tahar Ben Jelloun, *L'enfant de sable* (1985). Il ricorso a tale approccio teorico, che si avvale delle intuizioni di Bourdieu e di alcuni studi di Casanova e Damrosch, permette di illustrare in che misura il successo di un lavoro letterario sia il prodotto di intersezioni tra il suo valore estetico e le dinamiche socioeconomiche che regolano il mercato editoriale. Nell'opera di Ben Jelloun, collocata come il suo autore sulla soglia tra due mondi, confluiscono elementi di due sistemi letterari e culturali: quello occidentale e quello arabo-persiano. Ne *L'enfant de sable* è riscontrabile un'ibridità su più livelli – narratologico, intertestuale e linguistico – che può essere interpretata, nel quadro teorico della World Literature, come una strategia di negoziazione tra due culture per incontrare il favore di un pubblico più ampio. Dalla lettura del romanzo in questa prospet-

¹ Individual sections were written by Binasco (2), Ogliari (3) and Agnelli (4).

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tiva emergono ambiguità e criticità riguardanti l'opera di Ben Jelloun: da un lato l'accusa di orientalismo forzato per vendere un prodotto conforme alle aspettative dell'Occidente sul Mondo Arabo, dall'altro l'apprezzamento per un'opera in cui l'autore combina magistralmente due culture in una costruzione linguistica e narrativa di innegabile valore estetico, che ha il merito di aprire una finestra di contatto tra due culture.

1. *Introduction*

A burgeoning field of study, World Literature is intimately related to the concept of *limen*, because its objects of analysis are those literary works «that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language».² The focus is on the ability of a work to transcend the boundaries of the culture that has produced it, an ability today favored by the process of globalization, which makes cultural-political boundaries more fluid and enables writers from marginal areas to aim at a global readership. At the same time, to be studied in the perspective of World Literature, a work should provide a «window, [i.e.] a privileged mode of access into some of the deepest qualities of its culture of origin».³ This is the case with the novel *L'enfant de sable* (1985),⁴ the first international bestseller by the French-Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun, which opens a window into recondite aspects of Moroccan culture and society under the French rule. Yet, the author enriches his narrative also with allusions to the Western literary canon, thus demonstrating his status of global writer standing between two Worlds: Western and Arabic. His dual formation also enables him to discern the demands of the Euro-American market, which grants a much wider readership than the Arabic:⁵ thus, in *L'enfant de sable*, Ben Jelloun deploys a set of strategies of hybridization and compromise that mainly imply a confrontation with Western literary taste, an attuning to it and which concern three fundamental aspects – narrative style, theme and language. Their analysis

² DAMROSCH David, *What Is World Literature?*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2003, p. 4.

³ DAMROSCH David, *How to Read World Literature*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken 2008, p. 66.

⁴ BEN JELLOUN Tahar, *L'enfant de sable: roman*, Édition du Seuil, Paris 2014.

⁵ Cf. CASANOVA Pascale, *La République mondiale des Lettres*, Seuil, Paris 1999.

reveals the author's heavily criticized ambition to reach the Western readership, but being aware of it should not prevent from acknowledging the aesthetic value of *L'enfant de sable*, which strikes its readers as a well-constructed novel at the narratological and linguistic levels and even sheds light on aspects of the colonial Morocco less pleasant to Western eyes.

2. *Negotiating literary blending through narrative embedding*

Moroccan but resident in France, Ben Jelloun is an author defined by a «rhizomatic positioning»⁶ as he stands between the two shores of the Mediterranean, Western and Arabic. *L'enfant de sable* mirrors this ambivalent position for it can be viewed as the result of a negotiation between the two traditions and cultures. Through narrative structure and extensive intertextuality, Ben Jelloun achieves a blending of Western and Arabic techniques and references, aimed to the same metadiegetic discourse.

L'enfant de sable narrates the gender unrest of Ahmed/Zahra, born female but raised as male in colonial Morocco by the father, concerned by inheritance matters. From the beginning, Zahra's story is depicted as a «circular street»,⁷ with twists, involutions and no certain ending. The narrative mode follows this cyclic pattern and thanks to concentric micronarratives strengthens the mystery and openness of the story. *Enchâssement* (embedding) is the main technique: within an extradiegetic frame, multiple storytellers gradually prevail over the omniscient narrator, blurring the diegetic levels. In chapters I-XIII the reader is puzzled by the riveting tales of the storytellers, whose intradiegetic narrations also grow to frame metadiegetic insertions: letters, Ahmed's diary, stories by the audience. Here the entanglement not only affects the diegesis but subverts narrative roles, emphasizing the enchanting power of language. After a sudden disappearance of the storytellers, former spectators continue the interrupted story with their own parallel versions. Apparently now the narration becomes easier, but against linearity the doubt of authenticity surfaces. Every interpretation is presented as

⁶ LEWIS Mary Anne, *Between Francophonie and World Literature in French: Tahar Ben Jelloun's evolving authority*, in «The Journal of North African Studies», 21:2 (2016), pp. 301-309 [302].

⁷ BEN JELLOUN, *L'enfant*, cit., p. 14. Other occurrences at p. 19, 57.

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equivalent so that the authority of each narrator is subtly undermined and the reader's expectation of a truthful account is challenged. This kaleidoscopic narration, full of delays and refractions, seems to end with Fatouma who pretends to be Zahra: yet, a new *conteur* appears shuttering all her claims. It is the Blind Troubadour who re-opens the narration with elliptic memories about a woman who might be the main character. At last, the first storyteller returns and ends the circle of narration, but by abandoning the story he paradoxically establishes its incompleteness, finalizing the shift of focus from content to narration itself. In a way that recalls concerns and techniques of Western postmodern debates, textuality and discourse are fragmented and questioned while barriers between narrators, characters and reader appear persistently distorted. Throughout the novel, the embedding reverses all the narrative levels, inviting the discovery and appreciation of the infinite potential of narrative.

Besides *enchâssement*, another strategy reinforcing the metadiegetic dimension is the intertwining of oral and written forms of discourse. Presented as the account of an oral story based on a written book, the novel displays a narrative hybridity: the embedding of forms of discourse separates the levels of narration keeping them distinct and guiding the reader. The text features several oral rhetoric devices – repetitions, addresses to the audience, metaphors, narrative detours – which abound in the first part, where the storytellers often sound so redundant to appear «devoured»⁸ by their sentences. The characterization of every narrator with traits of orality diverges neatly from the written syntax and rhythms of Ahmed's diary. This distinctive oral quality along with the setting reminds of traditional Arabic storytelling. Ben Jelloun's «hypnotic mix of fable and modernity»⁹ resembles the ancient Moroccan custom of *raconteurs* who earn their living by telling stories in the market square. So, both the *enchâssement* and the tension toward orality force the attention on language while also referring to different literary traditions. Built on a structure that combines Arabic models with literary demands of Western postmodernity, the novel engages the audience in an os-

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁹ According to the Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Sahykh in JAGGI Maya, *Interview: Tahar Ben Jelloun*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/may/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview27>.

cillatory movement between the familiar and the unfamiliar: «the sort of relation most likely to make a productive change in our own perceptions and practices», as Damrosch specified (DAMROSCH 2003, pp. 11-12).

This double canon is also noticeable in the deep intertextuality running throughout the work. The most obvious reference – evident in the use of *enchâssement* – is *The Arabian Nights*, which modeled the French representations of Persian-Arabic culture in the Western canon since its first translation.¹⁰ But quotations from different authors and genres surface the novel: Quranic Surahs, Sufi or mystic poetry of Firdoussi and Ibn Al-Fârid coexist with allusions to Western tradition, in keeping with Ben Jelloun's strategy of negotiation. In particular, there is a subterranean imagery (labyrinth, libraries and esoterica) related to Borges, also disguised as an intradiegetic storyteller: the Blind Troubadour is presented as a librarian from Buenos Aires who cites passages from Borges's stories (*The Garden of Forking Paths* and *The Secret of the Phoenix*).¹¹ However, the two canons are handled differently: if the association with Borges is insisted but never explicit, the Arabic references always recur with some details or explanations out of consideration to the Western reader. This subtle compromise reveals a preference for non-Arabs or non-Arabist readers, therefore the risk of simplifying Arabic imagery and materials. Nonetheless, the last chapters complete the blending of Arabic and Western literary worlds. Through Borges alter ego the narration assumes the point of view of Western tradition,¹² intensifying the contrast with Arabic settings, themes and characters. But cultural and literary differences come together and build an atmosphere of mystery reaching its acme with the Troubadour's narration that establishes a mythical dimension. Meanwhile, he confirms the core of the previous stories and of the whole novel:

¹⁰ Cf. JACQUEMOND Richard, *Translation and cultural hegemony: the case of French-Arabic translation*, in L. Venuti (ed.), *Rethinking translation. Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, Routledge, London 1992, pp. 130-158 [151].

¹¹ For a complete list of Borges' references see FAYAD Marie, *Borges in Tahar Ben Jelloun's L'Enfant de sable: Beyond Intertextuality*, in «The French Review», 67, 2 (1993), pp. 291-299.

¹² Cf. AIZENBERG Edna, *Borges Postcolonial precursor*, in «World Literature Today», 66 (1992), pp. 21-26. Aizenberg defines Borges a forerunner of postcolonial novelists as Ben Jelloun exactly for the hybrid positioning here discussed.

both the intradiegetic and metadiegetic levels aim to reveal how discourse can enchant the audience and fulfil its inner curiosity and desire to get lost in depths and turns.

In conclusion, embedding is the novel's matrix, as it marks diegetic levels, forms of discourse and intertextuality. Ben Jelloun's previous work *Harrouda* (1974)¹³ already presents the same attempt of negotiating between traditions and genres and, as *L'enfant de sable*, it is also characterized by an episodic structure with several narrators and a metadiegetic correlation between writing and characters.¹⁴ Yet, the book has no clear plot and is hardly recognizable as a novel by the Western audience, since it is a fragmented succession of myths, poems, poetical prose, essays. In contrast, in *L'enfant de sable*, both narrative structure and intertextuality are kept in control through style and a more balanced compromise on form is reached. Ben Jelloun designs a novel where Arabic and Western cultures meet and contribute to a metadiegetic discovery of voids, gaps and uncertainties in language and narration. With its gender quest Ahmed/Zahra becomes emblematic of the world of narration defined by similar ambiguity and mystery so that the discontinuity of the subject reflects the one of narration. Ben Jelloun so finalizes the negotiation and manages to open a window between the shores of the Mediterranean.

3. *A timely topic: a case of culture commodification?*

In *L'enfant de sable* multiple storytellers take the floor to narrate their own version of Zahra's story. Their tales blend so chaotically that the narrative structure resembles a maze of entangled words: it is an endless succession of accounts which is mirrored and visually rendered by the descriptions of the fictional space the characters inhabit. Entanglement indeed characterizes the very space where the storytellers unfold their narratives: a medina appearing as «un enchevêtrement des lieux – des rues et des places».¹⁵

¹³ BEN JELLOUN Tahar, *Harrouda*, Denoël, Paris 1973.

¹⁴ Cf. AMAR Ruth, *Harrouda: le postmodernisme de Tahar Ben Jelloun*, in «Nouvelles Études Africaines», 17, 1 (2002), p. 26.

¹⁵ BEN JELLOUN, *L'enfant*, cit., p. 166. «As an entanglement of places – of streets and squares» [trans. mine]

The parallel between narrative structure and fictional space is enhanced by the use of words signifying openings in relation to both. Ben Jelloun conceives a narrative in which barriers dividing characters from creators are breached: since in every story there exist «des portes d'entrée ou de sortie»,¹⁶ by passing these thresholds the characters of a storyteller's tale often steal into the metadiegetic universe to become narrators themselves.¹⁷ And entryways/exits (doors, gates, windows) abound also in the setting description, but these openings are less traversable than the former ones: they may even become closings for the characters, especially if female. In the novel, women are depicted within enclosed spaces – in their house or at the *hammam* – while men are seen in the market square or in the streets. Ben Jelloun so represents the institution of sexual segregation in traditional Islamic societies, divided by strict space boundaries into two spheres: the domestic one, distinctly female, and the sphere of public spaces, exclusively male. When Zahra muses that her condition opens up doors to her, she exposes the territoriality of Muslim sexuality: only disguised as a boy she can escape a life circumscribed by closed doors and trespass into traditionally male spaces.¹⁸

Besides domestic seclusion, other constraints affecting women are explored in the novel albeit less thoroughly: the narrative is punctuated with episodes highlighting to what extent women's inferiority to men is institutionalized in Islamic societies. As Ahmed says, being a man means behaving «comme un être naturellement supérieur à la femme», a *status quo* endorsed by «la religion, le texte coranique, la société, la tradition, la famille, le pays».¹⁹ The issue of gender inequality in Muslim countries still arouses great interest in the West, but it was of much broader interest when the novel was published. In the 1980s, France was undergoing the so-called *Lepénisa-*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43. «Doors to enter or exit» [trans. mine]

¹⁷ Cf. ERICKSON John, *Metokoi and Magical Realism in the Maghrebian Narratives of Tahar Ben Jelloun and Abdelkebir Khatibi*, in L. Parkinson Zamora, W. B. Faris (eds.), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Duke University Press, Durham 1995, pp. 427-450 [442].

¹⁸ Cf. BEN JELLOUN, *L'enfant*, cit., p. 44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130. «As a being naturally superior to women» and «Religion, the Quran, society, tradition, family, the country» [trans. mine].

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tion des esprits, which heightened anti-Maghrebian bias: the propaganda evoked images of oppressed women to point out the danger of allowing immigrants in the country. Consequently, readers sought confirmation of Le Pen's words in books written by Arabs. Maghrebian authors were in the spotlight: suffice it to say that, when Ben Jelloun won the Goncourt prize in 1986, a juror let himself slip that people would blame the *Le Pen-effect* for his winning, as they would have if he had lost.²⁰

In the perspective of World Literature, the choice of a theme appealing to the French can be deemed as a strategy adopted to reach a wider readership. It is a necessary compromise because, as Damrosch noted, «foreign works have difficulty entering a new arena if they don't conform to the receiving country's image of what the foreign country should be [...]» (DAMROSCH 2003, p. 117). It may be reasonably argued that, in 1980s France, readers expected books about Arab countries to cover the issue of women's oppression.²¹ However, Ben Jelloun's consideration for the Western readership has brought him harsh criticism by scholars and writers who believe that his strategy of compromise is nothing but a profitable exploitation of certain aspects of Islamic society to meet Euro-American tastes. El Younssi claims that the author «capitalizes on the clichéd trope of 'oppressed women' in Arab-Muslim societies»²² and by doing so he also fails to answer Spivak's call for a World Literature undermining today monolithic view of Islam.²³ His critiques are in line with those expressed by the writer Choukri, who dismisses his colleague's novels as commercial products meant to succeed on the French market.²⁴ Bourkhis and Boughali likewise expose a supposed commodification of Arab culture in Ben Jelloun's works, taxing them with

²⁰ Cf. GAILLARD Philippe, *Tahar le fou, Tahar le sage*, in «Jeune Afrique», 1987, pp. 44-46. Interestingly, Ben Jelloun won the Goncourt two years after the *exploit* of *Le Front National* at the European elections.

²¹ The graphic features usually arouse certain assumptions about a book's contents: significantly, the cover of the first edition of our novel shows two women made invisible by long *djellabas*.

²² EL YOUNSSI Anouar, *An Exoticized World Literature: Ben Jelloun at the Two Shores of the Mediterranean*, in «Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics», 34 (2014), pp. 225-250 [238].

²³ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

²⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

exoticism. While the former blames the novelist for overdramatizing Arab women's lot due to «sa volonté de faire dans l'exotisme» (BOURKHIS 1995, p. 193) the latter resents the reification of Moroccans dragged into the «boue d'un exotisme à la commande» (BOUGHALI 1987, p. 124).²⁵

However undeniable the tension towards the Western readership is, I nonetheless believe that Ben Jelloun does not debase the Arab culture in *L'enfant de sable* and that his critics fail to see how his representation of Moroccan society highlights the influence of the colonizer in shaping it. The novel does not merely provide sheer orientalist entertainment to its readers, but poses questions about the effects of the French rule, unveiling some of its unpleasant aspects, probably unfamiliar to Westerners. *L'enfant de sable* opens a window into Maghrebian culture, showing the melange of traditions forming it, as clear in the narratological and intertextual analysis.²⁶ But it is above all a window into Moroccan culture and society in the 1930s and 1940s, at the time of the Protectorate. People struggled against a rule which left the country in poverty: in chapter XVI Fatouma meditates on a land inhabited only by women and children, having the young men emigrated. Moreover, since the colonizers paternalistically felt responsible for improving women's life, their emancipation was seen as a concession to the foreigners by some embittered men, constantly reminded of their cultural inferiority. In *L'enfant de sable* national freedom is thus supposed to be in the hands of the superior men: at Ahmed's birth, the father publishes a note saying that this birth will bring prosperity to the country, whereas only shame had followed his daughters' births. Certainly, Ben Jelloun looks at the French/Western readership, but his attitude towards it is not an accommodating one.

4. *An Arabized-French novel: a well-constructed linguistic strategy*

In *L'enfant de sable*, the liminality between two worlds not only emerges at narratological and thematic levels, but also concerns its linguistic dimen-

²⁵ «His will to exoticize», «Mud of an exoticism à la commande» [trans. mine]. Similarly, El Younsi views the intertextual reference to *The Arabian Nights* in the light of exoticism.

²⁶ Cf. MARROUCHI Mustapha, *Breaking Up/Down/Out of the Boundaries: Tahar Ben Jelloun*, in «Research in African Literatures», XXI, 4 (1990), pp. 71-83.

sion. Ben Jelloun's linguistic choices play a fundamental role in terms of strategies adopted to reach a compromise with Western demands. The author creates a novel relying on French syntax, grammar and vocabulary: he then artfully combines them with elements from other languages in order to escort his reader through familiar and unfamiliar spaces by means of linguistic strategies. The novel's linguistic structure so perpetuates the oscillatory movement characterizing the whole narrative. *L'enfant de sable* is built on a multilingual dimension for the author inserts snippets of languages other than French, i.e. Spanish and Arabic. This plurilingualism is intertwined with intertextuality, as it occurs mainly in quotations from Borges, Arabic poetry and Surahs.

The coexistence of these languages results in a slightly Arabized French whose Arabic components may be considered – at first glance – the vehicle for an act of resistance against the language of the former colonizer, as it occurs with many postcolonial Algerian writers.²⁷ Yet, the French reader's understanding is never impaired, because the multilingualism is mediated by the author by means of translation or, in the case of passages from the Quran, of paraphrases.²⁸ Even the presence of Arabic terms does not impede a fluent reading process: first, the meaning of most of them – e.g. *henné* or *hammam* – is so familiar to western readers that an explanatory footnote would be seen as pedantic.²⁹ Second, more uncommon Arabic terms are always inserted into a context where their meaning can easily be deduced.³⁰ The same process of mediation is enacted when dealing with culture-specific

²⁷ Cf. IGOUJIL M. Kamel, *Postcolonial Algerian Writers In French: Language As Representation And Resistance*, in M. K. Igoudjil, S. Arfaoui-Abidi (eds.), *International conference proceedings on science, art and gender in the global rise of indigenous languages*, Institut supérieur des sciences humaines, Université de Jendouba, Jendouba 2014, pp. 168-188 [168].

²⁸ For observant Muslims, the Quran (the Word of God) must be reported only in Quranic Arabic, the sacred language, and cannot be translated directly. Ben Jelloun thus resorts to paraphrases in French whenever his narrators quote it.

²⁹ While in the French edition no graphical distinction marks Arabic or Spanish words, in the Italian one published by Einaudi, *Creatura di sabbia*, foreign words are italicised and footnotes explaining their meaning are added.

³⁰ Cf. BEN JELLOUN, *L'enfant*, cit., p. 28 for an example of mediated multilingualism: «On coupa les cheveux d'Ahmed, on lui maquilla les yeux avec du khôl. On l'installa sur un cheval en bois après lui avoir passé une djellaba blanche et couvert la tête d'un fez rouge».

elements, which are accompanied by commentaries or periphrases addressed to the French reader, in a process of cultural (rather than linguistic) translation:

Elle me donna aussi un tapis de prières où est reproduit, dans une trame désordonnée, la fameuse Nuit de noces de Chosroes et Hirin, miniature persane illustrant un manuscrit du Khamzeh, œuvre du poète Nizamy. Cela pour l'insolence. Jamais un bon musulman n'irait faire sa prière sur un dessin érotique du XVIe siècle!³¹

Ben Jelloun's consideration for the French – and generally speaking – Western readership attracted much criticism: the decision to write in a *major language* instead of Arabic – of which he boasts a deep knowledge – has been perceived as a lucrative action, French being the necessary instrument to sell «his 'products' to the Western readership». ³² But, as Casanova states in her seminal *La République mondiale des Lettres*, authors from peripheral and marginal countries need to write or to be translated in a *dominant language*, in order to reach a larger publishing market; in her view, linguistic dynamics – especially after the process of decolonisation – are based on the *prestige languages*, a literary and cultural prestige, but mainly political and economic: the balance between powers in literary world passes through powerful political relationships (CASANOVA 1999, pp. 124-125).³³

Undeniably, French grants direct access to Paris, one of the major publishing centers identified by Casanova, and to a wider readership than Arabic. According to statistics, works in French are more translated than those in Arabic and this is proved by Ben Jelloun's success: *L'enfant de sable* has

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163. The reference is to a work by the poet Nizamy, who is not so famous in the West: thus, the periphrases and the comment are clearly meant for the French reader. «She also gave me a prayer rug decorated, in a confused tangle, with the famous Wedding Night of Chosroes and Hirin, a Persian miniature depicting a Kamzeh manuscript by the poet Nizamy. What an insolence! A good Muslim would never pray on a XVI century erotic picture!» [trans. mine].

³² EL YOUNSSI, *An Exoticized*, cit., p. 226.

³³ Casanova draws the definition of *dominant language* linked to linguistic and economic dynamics from Pierre Bourdieu's essay *Ce que parlait veut dire*, Fayard, Paris 1982.

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been translated into more than forty languages, including English which implies entering the powerful Anglophone publishing market.

Ben Jelloun's linguistic choices are heavily criticized by El Younssi, for whom Ben Jelloun debases Arabic language: indeed, he deems the linguistic construction of the novel as a confirmation of the author's desire to sell the product «at the global market» (EL YOUNSSI 2014, p. 228). However, the ambition to be read worldwide was not the only reason why he chose French instead of Arabic. As the author himself claimed, the adoption of a major language is mainly due to his great consideration for French language and literature and to the freedom inherent to it. On the one hand, it is freedom of artistic expression, because Quran Arabic intimidates him: «[...] It is a sacred language, given by God in the shape of the Koran, [...] one feels very small in front of this language».³⁴ On the other hand, French grants Ben Jelloun freedom of speech and subtracts him from censorship in the Arabic World, of which he had been victim. While Ben Jelloun's novels and essays are translated and have a remarkable success all over the world, they circulate difficultly in Arabic countries: there, they are submitted to the revision of editors, who modify sensibly the Arabic translation and suppress passages which could be attacked by local censorship.³⁵ By writing in French, Ben Jelloun can deal with topics that would be taboo in Islamic cultures.

Writing in French is a key-factor in *L'enfant de sable* success, allowing the novel and its author to overpass boundaries and enter the international editorial system. Yet, the choice of French and the critiques voiced against it should not prevent the acknowledgment of the novel's aesthetic value, evident also at the linguistic level. As Bott wrote for «Le Monde»: «with [Ben Jelloun] under the sign of Borges, the language of Racine and Balzac is put at the service of the Oriental story».³⁶ Bott's statement can be read as a confirmation of the author's linguistic strategies, used to meet western readers' expectations on Arabic culture. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly a praise

³⁴ GUPPY Shusha, *The Art of Fiction CLIX*, in «Paris Review», 41, 152, Fall 1999, pp. 40-62 [44].

³⁵ Cf. SARDIN Pascale, *Trouble dans le genre – de la traduction anglo-américaine de L'Enfant de sable de Tahar Ben Jelloun*, <http://transatlantica.revues.org/4355>.

³⁶ Cf. MARKHAM James M., *Arab Novelist Falls In Love With French*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/25/world/arab-novelist-falls-in-love-with-french.html>.

to Tahar Ben Jelloun's remarkable linguistic work and to his ability to master different languages systems and combine them into a fluid and almost Classic French.

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