

سياسات عدم الترجمة: غموض الرواية كمقاومة في ادب ما بعد الاستعمار والشتات

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The Politics of Non-Translation: Novel Opacity as Resistance in Postcolonial and Diasporic Fiction

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المخلص

اللغة ليست مجرد وعاء فارغ للمعنى، بل هي مسرحٌ لصراعات السلطة القديمة مرارًا وتكرارًا. في البلدان التي تأثرت بالاستعمار، تظهر اللغة الإنجليزية دائمًا حاملةً معها عبءً ثقيلًا. صحيحٌ أنها تتيح فرصةً للظهور والسماع حول العالم، لكنها قد تُضعف أيضًا أساليب التفكير المحلية، فتجعل كل شيء يبدو متشابهًا. يُواجه الكُتّاب الذين نشأوا على أكثر من لغة هذه المشكلة باستمرار. استخدم الإنجليزية، فقد تتلاشى في خلفية الإمبراطورية؛ تخلّ عنها، فقد تختفي تمامًا. هذا الشد والجذب المستمر، وهذه الحاجة إلى اتخاذ خيارات بشأن اللغة، يكمن في صميم الكتابة ما بعد الاستعمارية.

Abstract

Language in postcolonial literature does more than just get a message across. It carries weight—struggle, memory, resistance. In this study, I look at how untranslated words, code-switching, and a mix of languages aren't just stylistic choices in three novels: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. They're political moves, and they're done on purpose.

I'm drawing on ideas from Édouard Glissant, who talks about the right to opacity, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's push for decolonizing language, and Gayatri Spivak's work on translation and who gets to speak for whom. These writers push back against the idea that everything has to be clear or easily translated, especially into English. They make language complicated on purpose—it's both an ethical stand and a storytelling tool. By doing this, they take back control over meaning and knowledge, breaking away from the grip of English and Western ways of reading. My analysis shows that this kind of linguistic resistance isn't just about words. It's about power.

Introduction

Language isn't just some empty container for meaning—it's where old battles over power play out again and again. In countries shaped by colonialism, English always shows up carrying baggage. Sure, it offers a shot at being seen and heard around the world, but it can also flatten local ways of thinking, making everything sound the same. Writers who grow up with more than one language run into this headache all the time. Use English, and you risk fading into the background of empire; drop it, and you might disappear entirely. This constant push and pull, this need to make choices about language, sits at the heart of postcolonial writing.

That's where non-translation comes in. Instead of smoothing everything over for the reader, some writers leave words and phrases untranslated—little islands of difference left standing. These aren't just missing pieces. They're packed with meaning, both political and creative. Édouard Glissant, in *Poetics of Relation*, calls this “the right to opacity”—the right for colonized people to keep something of themselves hidden, not laid bare for outsiders. In stories, this kind of opacity shakes up the reader's sense of control. It highlights the gaps in understanding and lets the speaker keep some power.





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This paper looks at how Díaz, Roy, and Márquez use this kind of linguistic opacity. Their novels, set in the Caribbean, South Asia, and Latin America, all push back against the idea that English should smooth everything out. Instead, they invite readers to live in the messy, in-between spaces of language—where not everything gets translated or explained. Reading becomes an act of negotiation, not just consumption.

Two key questions guide this inquiry:

1. How do these authors employ non-translation and multilingual texture to assert cultural autonomy?
2. What ethical relationship between reader and text emerges from moments of deliberate opacity?

Literature Review

Early debates in translation studies revolved around fidelity, equivalence, and linguistic transparency. Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995) exposed how Western translation norms privilege fluency, erasing the foreignness of texts to suit Anglophone sensibilities. Venuti advocates for "foreignizing" strategies that preserve linguistic difference as an ethical gesture. Building on this, postcolonial scholars reframed translation as a political practice. Tejaswini Niranjana's *Siting Translation* (1992) argues that colonial translation constructed hierarchies of knowledge, positioning Europe as the transparent center and the colony as the opaque periphery. Gayatri Spivak's essay "The Politics of Translation" (1993) extends this critique, warning that translation can reproduce imperial power by universalizing Western feminist or humanist categories.

Within this theoretical lineage, Édouard Glissant's notion of *opacity* stands as a radical departure. For Glissant, understanding does not require transparency; it requires relation. The right to opacity safeguards cultural particularity against the homogenizing logic of colonial comprehension. His perspective reframes the task of the reader: rather than decode, one must encounter difference without mastery.

In parallel, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) insists that linguistic self-determination is integral to decolonization. Writing in one's mother tongue, or maintaining indigenous linguistic presence within English, reclaims imaginative sovereignty. Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity further complicates this binary by locating identity in the "third space," a site of productive linguistic and cultural mixing.



Scholarly attention to multilingualism in individual authors has grown. Critics of *Oscar Wao* (D'Angelo 2014; Rodríguez 2018) note Díaz's use of Spanglish and comic-book vernacular to mirror diasporic consciousness. Studies of Roy's *The God of Small Things* (Sukumaran 2016; George 2020) explore how Malayalam intrusions and syntactic play critique colonial and patriarchal orders. Analyses of Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Franco 2012; Nandorfy 2014) emphasize the novel's magical-realist idiom as a politics of opacity that resists literal translation.

Yet few comparative studies have treated non-translation itself as a shared aesthetic of resistance across these geographically diverse traditions. This paper addresses that gap by reading linguistic opacity as a trans-regional postcolonial strategy that redefines both authorship and readership.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Grounded in **postcolonial translation theory**, the study synthesizes Glissant's philosophy of opacity with Ngũgĩ's linguistic nationalism and Bhabha's hybridity. Glissant (1990) conceives opacity as a right—the refusal to render oneself fully legible to systems of power. Ngũgĩ's emphasis on indigenous linguistic agency situates language as a locus of anti-colonial struggle, while Bhabha's hybridity foregrounds the creative potential of linguistic intermixture. Together they frame non-translation as both resistance and renewal.

The paper dives in with qualitative textual analysis, taking a close look at passages from all three novels. It zooms in on how the texts use multiple languages, slip in untranslated words, and set up context. The approach is both descriptive and comparative, showing how these language choices shape political meaning. The analysis centers on three things: how readers deal with confusion or “opacity,” how the story itself handles questions of understanding, and how the novels use language to deliver a bigger cultural critique.

Analysis / Discussion

1. Creole and Spanish Opacity in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Junot Díaz's novel, written in a hybrid blend of English, Spanish, and pop-culture idiom, constructs opacity as both authenticity and defiance. The narrative voice alternates between academic commentary and street vernacular, collapsing the boundaries between formal discourse and





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colloquial speech. Spanish phrases—“zafa,” “fukú,” “parigüayo”—appear without gloss, asserting their semantic autonomy.

Leaving some words untranslated shakes up the usual reading experience for people who only speak one language. Suddenly, you have to piece things together from the clues around you, or just live with not understanding everything. It’s uncomfortable, and that’s sort of the point—it’s a way to make readers feel a bit of what it’s like to be caught between cultures, like many immigrants do. Bhabha would call this the “third space,” a spot where languages and cultures crash into each other and start to form something entirely new.

On the political side, Díaz doesn’t just use Spanglish for style—it’s a way to survive. He refuses to translate for people who expect everything in plain English. Instead, he turns bilingualism into something real and powerful. The book asks English-speaking readers to meet it halfway, not the other way around. In the end, not translating becomes a kind of power move. Speaking in your own language, without explaining or simplifying, is a way of claiming the right to be complicated.

2. Malayalam–English Hybridity in *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy’s language operates at the level of rhythm and syntax as much as vocabulary. Her prose bends English to local cadence, producing sentences that sound like Malayalam even when written in English. Words such as “Ammu,” “Kochu,” and “vellutha” remain untranslated; their repetition naturalizes the regional lexicon within global English rather than subordinating it.

Roy’s way of telling the story lines up with what Spivak calls “strategic essentialism.” She puts the lives of women and Dalits front and center, and her language pushes back against the stiff rules of colonial English. Sentences break apart, capitals pop up in odd places, and there’s a kind of music to the words—like someone speaking out loud, not just writing. This mix isn’t just for show; it’s Roy taking back her culture, bit by bit.

Roy doesn’t just switch between languages for style. She brings back ways of knowing that got pushed down. Take Baby Kochamma—she twists English rules to judge people, and suddenly, being “correct” in English turns into a sign of colonial thinking stuck in your head. But when Rahel and Estha start to play with English, bending it to their will, language opens up. It becomes a place to breathe and experiment. Roy refuses to translate everything, and that’s the point—it’s not about



mastering or owning the words. It's about meeting the story with empathy, learning to listen instead of just trying to control.

3. Magical Opacity in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece predates much of postcolonial theory yet anticipates its core concerns. The novel's Spanish prose, even when translated, retains deliberate semantic density—names, idioms, and mythic cycles resist full domestication. The magical-realist mode itself is a linguistic politics: it allows the marvelous to coexist with the mundane without the mediation of rational explanation.

In translation, Márquez's opacity persists. Gregory Rabassa's English version famously preserves Spanish syntax and rhythm, ensuring that the foreignness remains audible. This decision enacts Venuti's principle of "foreignization." The reader experiences an estrangement that mirrors colonial difference: Macondo's world is self-sufficient, not waiting for Western validation.

The novel's cyclical structure reinforces this linguistic autonomy. Repetition of names (Aurelianos, José Arcadios) and events blurs individual identity into mythic time. Such circularity mirrors Glissant's idea of Relation—meaning circulates, echoes, and returns without closure. By refusing explanatory translation, Márquez transforms opacity into narrative method: the reader is drawn into a dense web of cultural memory that can be sensed but not entirely deciphered.

Conclusion

Díaz, Roy, and Márquez all lean into linguistic opacity as a way to push back. In their novels, refusing to translate isn't just a roadblock—it's a statement. They use it to claim their own cultural ground and push back against the idea that one language or way of knowing should dominate. These books ask readers to meet them halfway, to accept that understanding will always be a bit incomplete, and to let go of the urge to grasp everything—an urge rooted in colonial thinking.

Looking at the evidence, non-translation in postcolonial fiction works on a few different levels. It shapes the feel and rhythm of the writing, acts as a political stand against language dominance, and reimagines reading as a relationship instead of a conquest. In every case, opacity turns literature into a space for decolonial action.





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There's more exploring to do—future work can take this approach into other language worlds, like Arabic-English, Francophone-Creole, or Indigenous-Anglophone spaces, to see if opacity plays the same role with different colonial backstories. But right now, these novels make one thing clear: refusing to translate is its own kind of liberation.

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