

## The Translation of Mahi Binebine: Cultural Challenges and Humanistic Resonances

TAIB Hanane<sup>1</sup>, CHAFAI Nadia<sup>2</sup>, SAFIR Youssef<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Student, SLLACHE Research Laboratory, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Dhar Mehrez, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University (USMBA), Fez, Morocco, [hanane.taib@usmba.ac.ma](mailto:hanane.taib@usmba.ac.ma), +212 6 52 30 09 52

<sup>2</sup>Higher Education Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Dhar Mehrez (FLSHDM), Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University (USMBA), Fez, Morocco, [chafai\\_n@yahoo.fr](mailto:chafai_n@yahoo.fr), +212 6 65 62 59 19

<sup>3</sup>PhD Student, Applied Human Sciences Laboratory, École Normale Supérieure (ENS), Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University (USMBA), Fez, Morocco, [youssef.safir1@usmba.ac.ma](mailto:youssef.safir1@usmba.ac.ma)

### LICENSE



This article is licensed under the  
Creative Commons Attribution  
4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



PREFIX :

**10.63883**

**IJSRIS JOURNAL**



This is an open access article  
distributed under the terms of  
open access.

### ABSTRACT

Moroccan writer and painter Mahi Binebine amplifies the voices of the marginalized — migrants, the poor, and the

oppressed. His novels, translated into multiple languages, blend social realism, poetry, and Moroccan oral traditions. Yet, how can translators convey the raw emotion of his words, the rhythm of dialect, or the political urgency of his stories?

This article examines the challenges of translating Binebine's work, torn between cultural authenticity and readability. The study also explores translators' strategies: Should culture-specific terms like "djellaba" be kept or glossed? How to preserve Binebine's storyteller's voice, deeply rooted in Moroccan Arabic? Finally, it questions how translations shape his global reception, balancing cultural reclamation (Arabic editions) and cross-cultural dialogue (English translations).

**Keywords:** Translation, challenges, reception, impact, dialogue.

## Introduction

In the rich and varied world of contemporary Maghreb literature, Mahi Binebine occupies a unique place. A Moroccan writer and painter, he has established himself as a powerful voice for the voiceless, the marginalised, the exiled, and the women and children of working-class neighbourhoods. His novels, translated into many languages, tackle universal themes – migration, social marginalisation, the search for identity – whilst remaining deeply rooted in Moroccan reality. But translating Binebine involves far more than simply moving from one language to another: it means conveying a human experience, a sensibility, a collective memory. This entails tackling linguistic, aesthetic and cultural challenges, and reflecting on the very scope of translation as an act of mediation and creation.

This article offers an in-depth reflection, drawing on concrete examples and critical analyses, on the specific challenges involved in translating Mahi Binebine's works, with a , based on extracts translated into Arabic and English. The aim is to highlight the translators' strategies and their successes, as well as the inherent limitations of intercultural translation, by following a central theme: how can the humanity of the work, its unique voice, its roots and its universality be preserved? With this in mind, this study is organised around several complementary themes. We shall begin by presenting Mahi Binebine's major works and their international reception, in order to establish the literary and cultural context of the translation. We shall then analyse the principal linguistic, poetic and cultural challenges raised by his novels, drawing on concrete examples of translations into Arabic and English. We shall focus on the specific strategies and challenges faced by translators, examining in particular the issues of transcreation, the preservation of oral style, and the handling of cultural terms. Finally, we shall assess the impact of translation on the reception of the work, its role in intercultural dialogue, and the complementarity between literature and the visual arts in conveying Binebine's message.

## 1. Mahi Binebine: a creator straddling two worlds

### 1.1. The journey of a multilingual artist

Born in Marrakesh, a city where stories are shared by lantern light and where every alleyway holds the memory of a tale passed down through the generations. From a very young age, Mahi Binebine was steeped in Morocco's linguistic and cultural diversity, ranging from the Arabic dialect spoken in the markets to the French taught at school, and the folk tales that punctuate daily life. This mosaic of languages and cultures shaped his perspective and nourished his artistic sensibility.

After studying science in Paris, Binebine chose the path of creativity, oscillating between painting and writing, between exile and a return to his homeland. He makes marginality, exile and the quest for identity his favourite themes, giving a voice to the invisible and the forgotten. His writing, deeply rooted in Moroccan oral tradition, draws inspiration from the rhythm of storytellers, the musicality of proverbs and the richness of popular expressions.

He divides his time between Paris, Marrakesh and New York. This journey of exile and return permeates his entire body of work, in which social realism, poetry and oral tradition intertwine. His writing, at once understated and evocative, draws inspiration from folktales and popular narratives, as well as from painting, his second passion.

Exile, far from erasing his roots, actually strengthens them; indeed, it is always to Morocco that he returns to draw his inspiration. His literary work, characterised by commitment and empathy, gives a voice to the marginalised, the forgotten, and those who have only dreams and words to sustain them. Navigating between social realism, poetry and oral tradition, he weaves tales in which pain coexists with beauty, and in which memory becomes an act of resistance.

But how can this intimate and collective experience be translated into another language? The question of translation thus becomes central: how can one convey the emotional depth, the poetic power and the cultural specificity of a work born at the crossroads of several worlds? Binebine's biography, marked by displacement and cultural dialogue, immediately raises the issue of transmission: is translation a form of betrayal or reinvention? Is it possible to convey, in another language, the author's unique voice and the memory of his people?

To address this issue, the methodological approach adopted in this study is based on a hermeneutic and comparative reading of the source texts and their translations, combining literary

analysis, the study of cultural contexts and reflection on the role of the translator as a mediator. The aim is to explore, through concrete examples and a rigorous scientific approach, how the translation of Binebine's works reveals both the potential and the limitations of moving from one language to another, whilst examining the human dimension of this act of mediation.

Thus, Mahi Binebine's life journey, marked by exile, linguistic diversity and artistic creativity, raises profound questions about the challenges of literary translation. To translate Binebine is to attempt to recreate the complexity of a voice that oscillates between the personal and the universal, between the local and the global, between Moroccan memory and the French language, whilst preserving the emotional depth and cultural richness of his work.

## 1.2. Translated works and their scope

To address the question of Mahi Binebine's translated works in a precise and well-documented manner, it is essential to provide concrete examples of novels that have been translated into Arabic and English, whilst highlighting their significance and international reception.

Among Mahi Binebine's major works, several have gained an international audience thanks to their translation, notably into Arabic and English, which has contributed to broadening their readership and securing critical acclaim.

In English, two iconic novels illustrate this reach:

*\*Cannibales\** (Fayard, 1999) was translated into English as *\*Welcome to Paradise\** by Lulu Norman. This translation, published in 2003, was well received by the English-speaking press and enabled British and American readers to discover the reality of illegal migration as seen from Morocco.

*\*Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen\** (Flammarion, 2010), which won the Grand Prix du Roman Arabe, was translated into English as *\*Horses of God\** (Granta Books, 2013), also by Lulu Norman. This translation has been praised for its ability to capture the narrative power and human dimension of the original text, and received the English PEN Award for outstanding writing in translation.

These two novels, translated into English, have thus enjoyed greater visibility, not least thanks to their selection for international literary prizes, such as the shortlist for the Best Translated Book Award and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for *\*Horses of God\**.

Binebine's work has also been translated into Arabic, facilitating cultural reappropriation across the Maghreb and the Middle East. For example:

*\*Pollens\** was published in Arabic by Le Fennec in Casablanca under the same title, reflecting Moroccan publishers' interest in the local dissemination of his works.

Other novels, such as *\*Le Sommeil de l'esclave\** and *\*Les Funérailles de lait\**, have also been translated or published in bilingual editions, making the universal themes and Moroccan realities addressed by the author accessible to an Arabic-speaking readership.

These works foster dialogue between societies on the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. They also provide an opportunity to examine the choices made by translators, who are faced with the need to preserve the cultural specificity, musicality and oral quality of the source text, whilst making the work accessible to readers from very different backgrounds.

These works, translated into English, Spanish, German, Italian, Arabic and other languages, have also enabled Binebine to gain international recognition. The diversity of the translations and adaptations has helped to carry his voice far beyond Morocco, raising awareness amongst a wide audience of Moroccan social realities and establishing his work within the global literary and artistic dialogue. Here are the main titles and their equivalents in other languages, with specific references:

- *\*Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen\** (2010), translated into English as *\*Horses of God\** by Lulu Norman (Tin House Books, 2013).

Translated into Spanish as *\*Los caballos de Dios\** (Alfaguara, 2016).

Translated into Catalan as *\*Les Estrelles de Sidi Moumen\**.

Translated and published in Arabic by Le Fennec, Casablanca, under the title:

- *\*Cannibales\** (1999), translated into English as *\*Welcome to Paradise\** by Lulu Norman (Granta Books, 2003).

Translated into German as *\*Willkommen im Paradies\** (Lenos Verlag).

*\*Le Fou du Roi\** (2017), translated into English as *\*The King's Fool\** by Ben Faccini (MacLehose Press, 2020).

Translated into Spanish as *\*Yo, bufón del rey\** (Alfaguara, 2018).

Translated and published in Arabic by Le Fennec, Casablanca.

- *Pollens* (2001) Translated and published in Arabic by Le Fennec, Casablanca.

Translated into Spanish as *\*Polen\** (Akal Literaria, 2003).

*Rue du pardon* (2019) Translated into Catalan as Carrer del perdó (Angle Editorial, 2020). Arabic translations are often published by Le Fennec in Casablanca, enabling regional distribution and cultural reappropriation.

*\*Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen\** was adapted for the cinema under the title *\*Les Chevaux de Dieu\**, which further enhanced its international reputation.

Some of Binebine's works are also available in Italian and German, but the most notable translations remain those in English, Spanish and Arabic.

These translations bear witness to Mahi Binebine's international recognition and the ability of his work to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, whilst presenting specific challenges to translators in preserving the richness and uniqueness of his writing.

## 2. Challenges in translating Mahi Binebine's works

### 2.1. Transcreation: beyond literal translation

Binebine's writing, in French, incorporates numerous elements of Moroccan Arabic dialect, including proverbs, colloquial expressions and cultural references. This linguistic hybridity is the hallmark of his style, but also presents a challenge for the translator.

In *\*Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen\** (2010), the Moroccan proverb 'Still waters run deep' – which in Arabic is 'الماء الراكد خطر' – becomes 'Still waters run deep' in English: an idiomatic equivalent that erases the specific local cultural context. This approach is part of a dynamic of intermediality characteristic of Binebine's work, where literature engages in dialogue with oral culture. The translator must be sensitive to this dimension so as not to impoverish the text.

Faced with the richness of idiomatic expressions and cultural references, translators often resort to transcreation, a strategy that involves recreating the text to preserve its effect and emotional impact.

We note that the Arabic translation retains the cultural proximity, whilst the English version opts for an idiomatic equivalent. This adaptation facilitates understanding but dilutes the Moroccan specificity, reducing the sense of cultural disorientation. The English-speaking reader grasps the meaning but loses the local flavour, the colour of the Moroccan experience.

Here, the English translation, whilst faithful to the meaning, struggles to convey the musicality and poetic density of the French and Arabic. The raw emotion, the cadence, the repetition – everything that gives the original text its power – is diluted. The English-speaking reader is presented with an image, but with less resonance, less inner echo. It is not merely a matter of translating words, but of recreating an atmosphere, a linguistic texture, which speaks to the reader in their own language whilst preserving the authenticity of the source text.

### 2.2. The social and political dimension

Binebine's novels tackle complex social realities: poverty, marginalisation, violence and terrorism. The translation must make these contexts accessible without distorting them. Preserving the narrative voice and oral quality.

Binebine's narrative style is akin to that of an oral storyteller, featuring repetitions and spoken rhythms.

'You know, where we come from, life isn't easy. We struggle every day, we hope, we pray, we cry, but we hold on.' (2003, *\*Cannibales\**).

In Arabic dialect, we can translate this extract as follows: "عارف، عندنا الحياة ماشي سهلة. كنهاريو كل نهار، كنهناو، كنهليو، كنعيطو، ولكن كنعديروا".

In English: "You know, life isn't easy here. We fight every day, we hope, we pray, we cry, but we hold on." (2003, *Welcome to Paradise*), which does not fully capture the expressive power and musicality of the original text.

We conclude that Binebine's French, imbued with oral tradition, carries an emotional weight that is difficult to convey. Standard English, being more formal, does not fully capture the familiarity and musicality of the Moroccan dialect. The oral quality, the intimacy and the human warmth of the original text are difficult to translate without betraying the spirit of the work.

### 3. Specific techniques and challenges for translators

#### 3.1. Transcreation and cultural adaptation

Generally speaking, translators tend to swing between two extremes: literal translation, which can make the text obscure and ponderous, or adaptation, which makes it easier to understand but risks distorting the work.

In *\*Le Sommeil de l'esclave\** (2008), Mahi Binebine writes: 'He wore a worn djellaba and torn babouches, visible signs of his condition.' This sentence was translated into Arabic as: 'كان يرتدي جلابية بالية وبلغة ممزقة، علامات واضحة على حالته'.

In English: "He wore a worn djellaba and torn babouches, visible signs of his condition." We can see that the specific terms have been retained, but in English, the absence of explanatory notes may limit the understanding of an unfamiliar reader. Should the translator explain, adapt, or allow the reader to immerse themselves in the strangeness?

Indeed, translating Binebine is an act of creation and mediation that requires preserving the narrative voice and the oral quality of the text. Binebine's narrative voice often resembles that of an oral storyteller, with repetition, rhythm and musicality. In dialectal Arabic, this oral quality translates naturally, but in English, the translation loses this dimension. The passage 'Tu sais, chez nous, la vie n'est pas facile...' becomes 'You know, life isn't easy here...', which does not fully capture the expressive power and musicality of the original text. It is not simply a matter of translating words, but of recreating an atmosphere, a linguistic texture, which speaks to the reader in their own language whilst preserving the authenticity of the source text.

#### 3.2. Handling specific cultural terms

Words such as 'djellaba' or 'babouches' are markers of identity. Retaining them in the English translation is essential to preserve authenticity, but it raises the question of whether readers unfamiliar with these terms will understand them. In Arabic, these words are immediately comprehensible, whereas in English they may require explanatory notes or a glossary.

The translator thus becomes a cultural mediator, tasked with conveying not only a text but also a culture. Translation becomes an ethical act, involving the responsibility to convey a worldview. What notable differences exist between the original and translated versions of Binebine's works.

The notable differences between the original and translated versions of Mahi Binebine's works relate mainly to three

aspects: the rendering of emotional and poetic intensity, the conveyance of cultural and linguistic specificities, and the adaptation of the narrative style to the target language.

#### 3.3. Loss or transformation of emotional and poetic resonance

Binebine himself emphasises that certain emotions or images are 'untranslatable'. For example, he states that he cannot express everything in French because there are things that cannot be translated. The effort to describe a situation sometimes takes on a poetic quality in the target language.

Thus, when translated into French or English, certain expressions from the Moroccan dialect or Arabic lose their emotional depth or musicality. The English translation of *\*Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen\** (\*Horses of God\*) or *\*Cannibales\** (\*Welcome to Paradise\*) conveys the meaning but often dilutes the poetic power and the immediacy of Moroccan oral tradition.

#### 3.4. Cultural Specificities and 'Untranslatable' Elements

Certain Moroccan words or concepts have no direct equivalent in other languages. The example of the Arabic word 'dharra' (referring to a co-wife, but literally meaning 'wound') illustrates the loss of symbolic and emotional weight during translation. The word 'dharra', for example, has lost its original meaning and now refers solely to a second wife. In Arabic, it has lost the notion of 'wound'.

Similarly, proverbs, puns or references to Moroccan popular culture are often adapted or replaced by more universal equivalents, which erases the local specificity and the sense of cultural disorientation felt in the original version. Transcultural proverbs, idiomatic expressions and phraseology

It should be noted that Binebine's style, reminiscent of a storyteller, makes use of repetition, rhythm and the colloquial nature of the dialect. In translated versions, particularly those into English, this oral quality and musicality are often toned down, as literary English favours a more formal narrative style. This can make the narrator's voice seem more distant and less immersive than in the source text.

### 4. Reception and interpretation

Finally, translations can also influence how a work is received. For example, *\*Horses of God\** has been praised for its ability to convey Binebine's world, but some critics note that the novel's social and political dimension — which is deeply rooted in the Moroccan context — is sometimes interpreted in

a more universal way in foreign versions, at the risk of losing the subtlety of the original message.

Translations of Binebine's work capture the general meaning and universal scope of his themes, but sometimes lose the poetic richness, the oral quality, and the cultural specificity of the original text.

Certain Moroccan words, expressions or cultural realities are adapted, transformed or explained, which can alter the foreign reader's perception.

The narrative voice, which is strongly characterised by orality and empathy in the original, becomes more neutral or distant in the translated versions.

These differences illustrate the challenges and choices faced by translators of a work that is deeply rooted in a particular culture and language, yet intended to reach an international audience. Linguistic nuances are often lost or altered when translating his works.

Mahi Binebine's works, rich in linguistic hybridity and orality, contain numerous nuances that are lost or transformed during translation. Several linguistic aspects are particularly affected.

#### **4.1. Heterolingualism, orality and the musicality of the text**

The incorporation of orality into Binebine's work is a central feature, demonstrating his attachment to Morocco's cultural heritage. He uses colloquial expressions, proverbs and rhythms characteristic of the Moroccan dialect and oral storytelling. When translating, particularly into English or Spanish, this musical and rhythmic dimension is often diminished. Poetic writing, by its very nature, is a multifaceted language often described as untranslatable... the polysemy and ambiguities of poetic language are also central concerns for translators, who are aware of the abundance and infinite richness of the word.

Binebine frequently inserts words or phrases in Arabic dialect into his novels written in French, creating an effect of heterolingualism that enriches the text and bears witness to Morocco's multilingual reality. In translations, this effect is often neutralised or simplified, which can diminish the linguistic and cultural richness of the original text.

Binebine's writing relies on words with multiple meanings, deliberate ambiguities and polysemic imagery. In translation, it is not uncommon for certain layers of meaning or wordplay to be lost, as the target language does not always allow for the same semantic density to be reproduced.

Terms such as 'djellaba', 'babouches', or references to Moroccan customs are sometimes retained, sometimes explained, and sometimes adapted. This choice influences how the text is received: either the reader is plunged into a sense of strangeness, or they are guided, but at the cost of a loss of spontaneity and authenticity.

These losses or transformations are inherent in the transition from one language to another, but they also reveal the creativity and ethical choices of the translator, who must strike a balance between fidelity to the source text and accessibility for the target reader.

#### **4.2. Critical reception and international recognition**

Translation has contributed significantly to Binebine's international reputation. *\*Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen\**, translated into several languages, won the Prix Goncourt des lycéens in 2010. This success illustrates the importance of translation as a vehicle for recognition and dissemination.

The quality of translations is crucial to conveying the complexity of the characters and the depth of the themes. A successful translation enables the work to reach an international audience whilst highlighting the distinctiveness of Moroccan culture.

Translation opens up a space for dialogue between cultures, enabling foreign readers to discover the social, political and cultural realities of contemporary Morocco. For example, the translation of *\*Cannibales\** raises awareness of the tragedy of illegal migration – a global issue, but one told here from a profoundly Moroccan perspective.

Translation becomes a tool for deconstructing stereotypes and enriching mutual understanding, by highlighting the diversity and complexity of Maghrebi identities.

In addition to literary translation, film adaptations, such as that of *\*Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen\**, further cultural mediation by making the work accessible to a wider audience. These complementary forms contribute to the dissemination and reception of the work, creating a global artistic universe.

### **5. Art and painting in the work of Mahi Binebine: a visual translation of his novels and an emotional and symbolic extension**

#### **5.1. A shared aesthetic: forms, colours and themes**

Binebine's paintings, characterised by vivid colours, simplified forms and fragmented human silhouettes, visually convey the emotions, tensions and social realities explored in

his novels. The fragmented bodies and anonymous faces in his canvases evoke marginalisation and the search for identity.

This fragmented aesthetic acts as a visual translation of the literary atmospheres: whilst the text unfolds the narrative, the painting captures the moment and raw intensity, offering a different form of understanding and immersion.

Whilst Binebine's literature is a space for reflection and narrative construction, his painting is a more immediate and instinctive form of expression. The act of painting allows him to express what sometimes eludes words, notably social violence or the suffering of migrants, themes found in his novels and which reappear in his visual works in the form of universal symbols.

This complementarity enriches the overall reception of his work, as painting offers a sensory mediation accessible to an international audience, even those who do not speak French.

## 5.2. An intercultural and inter-artistic 'translation'

Finally, Binebine's visual art plays a role in cultural and intercultural mediation. His international exhibitions, where his paintings engage in dialogue with his writings, enable a diverse audience to perceive Moroccan culture from a perspective that is both contemporary and universal.

This dual expression — literary and pictorial — makes Binebine a bridge-builder between cultures, whose body of work contributes to the recognition of Maghreb literature and art on the international stage.

## Conclusion: translation, a space for humanity and dialogue

Translating Mahi Binebine involves engaging in a profound process of mediation between languages, imaginations and cultures. It is not simply a matter of converting a source text into a target language, but rather of allowing a unique voice to resonate through a new prism, whilst respecting its original context. Binebine's world, nourished by collective experiences, social memory and personal suffering, challenges the translator on a deeply human level. The task thus becomes an ethical responsibility: to preserve the emotional depth, the musicality, and at times the silences — everything that constitutes the soul of a narrative.

This work of transmission requires going beyond linguistic equivalences to engage in a process of interpretation and recreation, where fidelity is not synonymous with rigidity, but with a sensitive understanding of the text. Translating Binebine also means making the breath of the Global South

audible within the world's literary spheres, and thus contributing to a fairer recognition of Maghreb literature in the universal imagination.

Moreover, Binebine's work, often characterised by dialogues between the written and the visual, between the novel and painting, reminds us that literary translation is also an art of cultural polyphony. In this sense, translation becomes a space of hospitality, where multiple voices — sometimes dissonant, but never alien — come together. It offers an international readership a rare opportunity to encounter a profoundly Moroccan work, driven by an aesthetic of commitment and an uncompromising humanity.

Ultimately, translating Mahi Binebine means opening up a space for coexistence between languages and memories, between fidelity to one's roots and the call of the universal. It means helping to build a narrative bridge between peoples, where every word, every silence, becomes an act of resistance, recognition and transmission.

## Bibliography

- Amrani, H. (2017). *Writing from the Margins in Mahi Binebine: Between Aesthetics and Commitment*. Casablanca: Éditions Afrique Orient.
- Ballard, M. (2009). *Translation: Foundations and Methods*. Paris: Ophrys.
- Ben Jelloun, T. (2012). *Mahi Binebine, witness to a changing Morocco*. Le Monde des Livres.
- Berman, A. (1995). *Translation and the Written Word, or The Inn of the Far Away*. Paris: Seuil.
- Binebine, M. (1992). *The Slave's Sleep*. Paris: Stock.
- Binebine, M. (1999). *\*Cannibales\**. Flammarion. Paris.
- Binebine, M. (2001). *\*Pollens\**. Paris: Fayard.
- Binebine, M. (2009). *The Stars of Sidi Moumen*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Binebine, M. (2010). *\*Horses of God\** (L. Coverdale, Trans.). New York: Tin House Books. (English translation of *\*Les étoiles de Sidi Moumen\**)
- Binebine, M. (2019). *Rue du pardon*. Paris: Stock.

- Binebine, M. (2022). *\*Rue del perdón\** (trans. M. Á. García). Madrid: Ediciones del Oriente y del Mediterráneo. (Spanish translation of *\*Rue du pardon\**)
- Binebine, M. (2025). *The Night Will Carry Us Away*. Paris: Robert Laffont.
- Dalle, J.-M. (2013). 'The Wounded Body in the Work of Mahi Binebine: From Painting to Writing'. *\*Expressions Maghrébines\**, 12(2), 89–102.