

Ma(r)king the Difference: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Translation

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Reviewed by MD. ZEESHAN ALAM

Introduction

“Is there a common language to narrate the historical exclusion of those identities marked as different from an implicit norm”? With this compelling question, Tania Mancheno opens her book, inviting readers into a thorough exploration of how translation shapes our understanding of identity, power, and difference. Her work extends beyond translation as a linguistic process, examining its political and social functions in shaping cultural identities.

Based on her PhD thesis, the book reflects Mancheno’s expertise in political science, particularly in German colonial history, postcolonial theory, and translation studies. She explores how translation mediates relationships between colonial and postcolonial discourses, extending its role beyond language to reveal its impact on cultural and political narratives.

Mancheno argues that translation engages deeply with the politics of identity. Historical examples such as the Valladolid Debate and the Jewish Question illustrate how translation has justified colonial rule or excluded marginalised groups. She contends that in today’s multicultural societies, translation continues to shape which cultural identities are included or excluded from dominant narratives.

Drawing on key thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Frantz Fanon, Mancheno’s analysis is grounded in critical theory. Benjamin’s concept of “translatability” is central to her argument, as he defines it as “the passage from the unknown into the known” (Mancheno, 2023, p. 54). This idea underscores the intimate relationship between the original and the translated, showing how translation contributes to the survival of the original work. Fanon’s critique of colonialism and his theory of untranslatability further

enrich the discussion. Fanon describes the migration of colonised individuals to the metropolis as an “ontological passage,” where identities undergo a radical transformation, especially through language (Mancheno, 2023, p. 68). Through these insights, Mancheno emphasises how translation and identity in colonial contexts are defined by power relations.

The book, published by Springer Nature, spans 231 pages, divided into six well-researched chapters. With 234 footnotes and over 200 scholarly sources, Mancheno’s interdisciplinary approach is both thorough and expansive. The chapters progress logically, from historical contexts to contemporary debates, offering readers critical insights into how translation continues to shape cultural narratives in a globalised world.

Chapter Overview

Tania Mancheno organises *Ma(r)king the Difference: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Translation* into eight chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion, each contributing to her exploration of how translation operates at the intersections of politics, identity, and culture. It lays the groundwork by framing translation as a powerful force in shaping both historical and contemporary identities, particularly through its role in mediating cultural differences.

Chapter 2, titled *Translation and Culture—in Five Currents of Thought*, introduces the main theoretical perspectives guiding the book. Mancheno delves into translation studies, postcolonial studies, Black decolonial studies, cultural studies, and critical translation studies. She highlights the work of Gilles Deleuze and Homi Bhabha, noting that “translation is not only the conveyance of meaning but an act that influences cultural survival and renewal” (Mancheno, 2023, p. 19). This chapter sets the stage for how translation functions as a political tool.

In Chapter 3, *Translation as Method*, Mancheno emphasises the methodological significance of translation. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck’s concept of historical time and Benjamin’s ideas on translatability, she states, “translation is a method that extends

beyond the linguistic, offering a bridge between historical consciousness and cultural identity” (Mancheno, 2023, p. 55). This chapter underscores how translation has been historically used to both preserve and manipulate cultural narratives.

Chapter 4, *Translation and the Question of Minorities*, shifts the focus to the politics of minority representation. Mancheno explores how translation affects marginalised groups, discussing Edward Said’s work on Orientalism and Gayatri Spivak’s essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* She argues that “translation becomes an instrument of either empowerment or suppression, depending on the socio-political context” (Mancheno, 2023, p. 89). This chapter delves into the power dynamics inherent in translating minority voices.

In Chapter 5, titled *Translation: Moral Imperative or Colonial Question?* Mancheno explores how translation operates both as a moral imperative and a colonial tool. This chapter provides a comparative reconstruction of three intellectual debates—the Valladolid Debate, the Jewish Question, and modern multiculturalism—to analyse how translation has historically shaped the construction of cultural identities. Mancheno draws on historical examples, such as Las Casas’ and Sepúlveda’s debate over Indigenous peoples, to illustrate how translation has been used to distinguish between the norm and the ‘Other’. She contends that translation not only facilitates comprehension across cultures but also reinforces hierarchical distinctions that determine which identities are recognised and which are marginalised (Mancheno, 2023, p. 75). This chapter adds depth to her argument that translation, far from being neutral, is implicated in power relations that shape identity formation in both colonial and postcolonial contexts.

In Chapter 6, *Translation in the Valladolid Debate*, Mancheno presents one of the book’s key historical analyses, examining how translation was weaponised during the Valladolid Debate. She uses historical sources to show how translation facilitated colonial narratives over indigenous populations (Mancheno, 2023, p. 122). This chapter highlights how language became a tool for justifying colonial rule and controlling cultural narratives.

Chapter 7, *Translation and the Jewish Question*, continues the examination of translation in historical contexts, focusing on Jewish emancipation in Europe. Mancheno draws on Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno, examining how Jewish identity was constructed through translation within European discourse. “The translation of Jewish identity into European frameworks both emancipated and constrained the community” (Mancheno, 2023, p. 158). This chapter links the Jewish Question to broader debates about cultural and political inclusion.

In the final chapter, Chapter 8, *Translating Multiculturalism*, Mancheno explores how translation functions in contemporary multicultural societies. Drawing on Amartya Sen's concept of identity and violence, she discusses how translation shapes the integration and exclusion of Muslim communities in Western Europe. “Translation continues to mediate the boundaries of culture belonging, defining who is included and excluded from the national narrative” (Mancheno, 2023, p. 192). This chapter provides a critical reflection on the role of translation in today's globalised world, offering insights into ongoing debates about migration and identity.

Critical Evaluation

This critical evaluation of *Ma(r)king the Difference: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Translation* is structured under four key subheadings: an overview of the theoretical framework, an analysis of the methodology, the book's contribution to the field, and an examination of its strengths and limitations.”

Theoretical Framework

Mancheno's theoretical framework is wide-ranging and nuanced, drawing not only on Walter Benjamin and Frantz Fanon, but also on theorists like Hannah Arendt, Reinhart Koselleck, and Theodor Adorno. Throughout the book, she successfully demonstrates how translation has been used historically as a tool of cultural control, especially in colonial contexts. One of the most compelling aspects of her work is her engagement with Hannah Arendt's idea of the “right to have rights,” which she connects with translation as an act that either affirms or denies one's inclusion in political and cultural

narratives (Mancheno, 2023, p. 149). Mancheno presents a sharp critique of multiculturalism, arguing that it often masks exclusionary practices. She contends that, while seemingly inclusive, multiculturalism frequently translates cultural differences into frameworks that reinforce dominant power structures. In her words, 'translation serves as a mechanism that reinterprets cultural differences in ways that either include or exclude certain identities' (Mancheno, 2023, p. 192). This challenges the common perception of multiculturalism as inherently positive, revealing its potential to subtly perpetuate inequality.

Methodology

Mancheno adopts a historical-comparative methodology that combines historical case studies with theoretical discussions. This framework spans centuries and highlights the continuity of translation as a tool for cultural control and identity formation. For example, she examines the Valladolid Debate (1550–1551), where Bartolomé de las Casas used translation to advocate for the humanity of Indigenous peoples. In contrast, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda employed translation to justify their conquest (Mancheno, 2023, p. 123).

She also analyses the Jewish Question, exploring how Jewish identity was translated into European political discourse. Often, this translation framed Jews as outsiders. Drawing on Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt, Mancheno shows how translation was both a tool for emancipation and exclusion during the assimilation debates of 19th-century Europe (Mancheno, 2023, p. 158). This nuanced analysis reveals how translation has long been tied to questions of belonging and political rights.

However, while these historical analyses are well-researched, the transitions between the historical contexts and theoretical arguments could be clearer. More explicit connections between the Valladolid Debate, the Jewish Question, and modern issues like migration and multiculturalism would help readers grasp the continuity of these themes. Additionally, the book's focus on European-centred case studies may limit its global relevance. Including non-Western examples could have expanded the scope and made the conclusions

more broadly applicable. Although the historical-comparative method effectively links past and present, the book's greatest strength lies in how it addresses broader concerns within contemporary translation studies and multiculturalism. This leads to the book's key contribution to the field.

Contribution to the Field

This work makes a significant contribution to both translation studies and multiculturalism debates. Her ability to draw connections between the micro-level of translation practice and the macro-level of global political issues such as colonialism, migration, and multiculturalism is a testament to the book's academic rigour. By framing translation as a political act, she challenges readers to consider how translation has historically served as a means of both oppression and resistance. This is particularly evident in her analysis of contemporary Western contexts, where she critiques the idea that multiculturalism naturally leads to inclusivity. Instead, she argues that “translation continues to function as a gatekeeper, determining which cultural identities are included or excluded from the dominant national narrative” (Mancheno, 2023, p. 194).

One of the most powerful examples she provides is her analysis of how Muslim communities in Europe are translated into dominant cultural frameworks. She explains that translation often portrays Muslim identities as incompatible with Western values, reinforcing their exclusion from the national narrative. This contemporary example echoes earlier exclusionary practices seen in the Valladolid Debate and the Jewish Question (Mancheno, 2023, p. 200).

Strengths

One of the book's primary strengths is its interdisciplinary approach. Mancheno moves fluidly between political theory, historical analysis, and translation studies, offering readers a rich and multifaceted perspective on how translation has shaped cultural and political identities over time. Her engagement with a wide range of scholars—Adorno, Arendt, Koselleck, and others—enriches her analysis and provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the politics of translation. For instance, her application of Arendt's

concept of the 'right to have rights' effectively demonstrates how translation affirms or denies political inclusion (Mancheno, 2023, p. 149). Similarly, by drawing on Koselleck's analysis of historical time, she underscores the role of translation in shaping political identities, noting that 'translation links temporalities in a way that reflects broader cultural shifts' (Mancheno, 2023, p. 88).

Another significant strength is her historical framing. Mancheno's examination of the Valladolid Debate and the Jewish Question effectively demonstrates the politicisation of translation, situating it within broader power dynamics. This historical perspective is not just informative but also serves as a bridge to contemporary issues, reinforcing how the past influences current debates on multiculturalism

Limitations

While the book excels in its theoretical depth, one of its limitations is the density of its argumentation, which may pose challenges to readers unfamiliar with the works of critical theorists like Benjamin or Fanon. The frequent engagement with complex theoretical frameworks, while intellectually enriching, might make the text less accessible to a broader audience or those outside academic fields like political theory or translation studies. Additionally, there is a repetitive nature to some of her arguments, particularly when she returns to themes of translatability across multiple chapters. Though these points are crucial to her thesis, at times, the reiteration of these concepts could have been more concise to enhance the book's overall readability.

Another point to note is that Mancheno's focus is heavily centred on Western contexts, such as the colonial and postcolonial landscapes of Europe. While this focus is understandable given the scope of her argument, it may limit the global applicability of her conclusions. More case studies or examples from non-Western perspectives could have enriched her analysis and broadened its relevance.

Conclusion

Mancheno's *Ma(r)king the Difference: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Translation* is a critical guide for readers interested in the intersections of translation, politics, and identity. This book offers profound insights into how translation operates as a tool of both inclusion and exclusion, shaping national and cultural narratives. Readers who engage with this work will understand that translation is not merely a linguistic process but a powerful political act that defines who is integrated or marginalised within society. Academics in the fields of translation studies, postcolonial theory, and political science, as well as those involved in cultural policy or migration studies, will find this book particularly illuminating.

Ultimately, *Ma(r)king the Difference* offers a nuanced critique of multiculturalism, questioning whether it genuinely fosters diversity or merely conceals systemic exclusions. This book will push readers to reconsider the role of translation in today's globalised world, showing that its consequences are far-reaching, influencing how societies perceive and construct identities. Mancheno's work underscores the need to rethink translation not just as a communication tool but as an integral force in the ongoing politics of identity and belonging (Mancheno, 2023).

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About the Reviewer

Md. Zeeshan Alam

Md. Zeeshan Alam is currently pursuing PhD at the Department of Linguistics and Phonetics, The English and Foreign Languages University, Regional Campus, Lucknow, India. He has presented papers at the International Conference of the Linguistic Society of India in the areas of pragmatics and socio-pragmatics. His research interests include Translation Studies, cross-cultural communication, pragmatics, socio-pragmatics, and discourse analysis.

Email: mdzeeshana50[AT]gmail[DOT]com

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