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The Politics of Cultural Translation in *The Breadwinner*: A Critical
Discourse Study

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Abstract

This study critically examines the politics of cultural translation in Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner* through the analytical lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As a globally circulated humanitarian narrative, *The Breadwinner* transforms Afghan socio-cultural realities into a form accessible to Western readership, thereby mediating complex intersections of gender, conflict, and identity. Drawing upon the frameworks of postcolonial translation theory and discourse studies, the research investigates how narrative strategies, linguistic choices, and representational patterns construct particular images of Afghan girlhood, Islamic culture, and Taliban authoritarianism. The analysis reveals that while the text foregrounds themes of resilience and empowerment, it also subtly embeds asymmetrical power relations that reproduce Western-centric perspectives of the "other." Through a close reading of key episodes and discursive markers, the study highlights how cultural specificities are negotiated, simplified, or recontextualized during the translation of Afghan lived experience into a humanitarian literary market. Ultimately, this research argues that *The Breadwinner* operates not merely as a story of survival but as a cultural and political artifact shaped by global discourses on trauma, war, and female agency. The study contributes to broader debates on representation, ethics, and power in literature that translates marginalized cultures for international audiences.

Keywords: Cultural Translation, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Postcolonial Representation, Humanitarian Narrative, Afghan Girlhood.

Introduction

Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner* has emerged as a globally influential humanitarian narrative that mediates the lived realities of Afghan women and children for an international readership, inviting critical attention to the ways in which culture, conflict, and identity are translated through literary discourse. Situated at the intersection of postcolonial studies, translation theory, and critical discourse analysis, the novel serves as a compelling site to investigate how narratives about marginalized communities are shaped, simplified, or reframed within dominant ideological structures. As a Western-authored text representing an Afghan context, *The Breadwinner* inevitably engages in complex processes of cultural translation that involve choices about language, representation, and power choices that determine how readers perceive Afghan girlhood, Islamic traditions, Taliban authority, and everyday survival under conflict. This study seeks to interrogate these narrative strategies by examining how the text constructs meaning, negotiates cultural specificity, and reproduces or resists hegemonic perspectives. Through a close discourse-oriented analysis, the research positions *The Breadwinner* not only as a children's novel of resilience but also as a political artefact that participates in global discourses of humanitarianism, gender, and the "other."

Review of Literature

Studies on cultural translation in literature have expanded significantly over the past two decades, with theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Tejaswini Niranjana, and Gayatri Spivak underscoring the ideological nature of translating marginalized cultures into dominant linguistic and cultural frameworks. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" highlights how cultural meaning is negotiated through hybridity, while Niranjana argues that translation often reinforces colonial hierarchies through selective representation and discursive framing. These foundational ideas provide a critical lens for understanding how Western-authored narratives mediate non-Western realities, especially in contexts shaped by war, patriarchy, and global power imbalances. In parallel, postcolonial scholars emphasize that translation is not a neutral linguistic act but a political process that shapes the visibility and voice of subaltern communities.

Research on humanitarian and conflict literature further demonstrates that children's novels set in war zones often employ narrative strategies that simplify cultural complexities for global readerships. Scholars such as Huggan, McLeod, and Whitlock discuss how "humanitarian storytelling" constructs empathy but may also perpetuate stereotypes about the Global South. These studies argue that well-intentioned narratives sometimes reproduce Western-centric framings that depict non-Western societies through tropes of suffering, victimhood, or exoticism. This body of research is crucial for examining *The Breadwinner*, which has been widely recognized for raising international awareness about Afghan women's struggles yet simultaneously scrutinized for its representational politics.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing on the work of Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and van Dijk, provides a methodological foundation for exploring how language constructs power, ideology, and social meaning. CDA-based studies on literary texts show how discursive choices lexical patterns, metaphors, narrative voice, characterization reveal deeper ideological positions embedded in the text. Such research indicates that discourse in children's literature often operates through implicit political messaging, shaping perceptions of culture, gender, and conflict. Applying these insights to *The Breadwinner* enables a nuanced examination of how Ellis's narrative translates Afghan cultural realities into a Western humanitarian framework.

Existing scholarship on *The Breadwinner* primarily focuses on themes of resilience, female agency, trauma, and survival. Critics have explored the novel's portrayal of girlhood under Taliban rule, its pedagogical value, and its role in creating global awareness about Afghanistan. However, fewer studies explicitly analyze the cultural politics of representation and translation within the text. While some research critiques the novel's tendency toward cultural simplification, there remains a gap concerning

systematic discourse analysis of how Afghan identity, gender norms, religious practices, and socio-political realities are linguistically encoded and narratively mediated. This study addresses that gap by integrating postcolonial translation theory with Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how *The Breadwinner* constructs, negotiates, and circulates cultural meaning within transnational literary spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in postcolonial translation theory, which views translation not merely as a linguistic act but as a political and ideological process shaped by unequal power relations between cultures. Foundational theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Tejaswini Niranjana argue that translation frequently participates in constructing the cultural “other,” often reinforcing dominant Western epistemologies. Bhabha’s notion of the “third space” provides an important conceptual tool for understanding how translated cultural meanings emerge from negotiation, hybridity, and ambivalence. Spivak’s critique of “speaking for” the subaltern highlights how voices from marginalized cultures are mediated, filtered, or overwritten by dominant narrative and linguistic frameworks. Niranjana’s analysis of colonial translation practices further reinforces that translation is historically embedded in projects of power, representation, and ideological control. These theoretical perspectives collectively guide the examination of how *The Breadwinner* translates Afghan cultural realities for a global, predominantly Western readership.

In addition to postcolonial translation theory, this study draws upon the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as articulated by scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Teun A. van Dijk. CDA emphasizes that language is a social practice that both reflects and reproduces power relations. Fairclough’s three-dimensional model comprising textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice provides an analytical structure for examining how linguistic choices in *The Breadwinner* shape cultural meaning and ideological positioning. Wodak’s discourse-historical approach supports the contextualization of the novel within broader socio-political narratives surrounding Afghanistan, gender politics, and global humanitarian discourse. Van Dijk’s work on ideological discourse structures further contributes to understanding how representations of identity, culture, and conflict are embedded in patterns of vocabulary, syntax, perspective, and narrative framing. Collectively, these CDA frameworks serve to reveal the subtle mechanisms through which Ellis’s narrative constructs and circulates meaning.

The intersection of postcolonial translation theory and CDA forms the central analytical lens of this research. By bringing these frameworks together, the study investigates not only what cultural elements are translated or represented in the text, but also how these representations function within larger ideological systems. The combined perspective enables an exploration of the novel’s dual role as both a humanitarian intervention and a cultural mediator that negotiates the tensions between advocacy and stereotyping. Through this integrative theoretical approach, the analysis aims to illuminate the politics underlying the narrative’s portrayals of Afghan girlhood, Islamic cultural practices, Taliban authority, and Western humanitarian concern. Ultimately, this theoretical framework supports a nuanced critique of *The Breadwinner* as a literary artifact shaped by complex global discourses of power, identity, and representation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual analysis, integrating the principles of postcolonial translation theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting linguistic patterns, narrative strategies, cultural representations, and ideological meanings embedded in *The Breadwinner*. Rather than measuring quantitative variables, the study aims to uncover how the text constructs cultural identities, mediates Afghan socio-political realities, and shapes readers’ perceptions through discourse.

The primary text selected for analysis is Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner* (2000), chosen for its global circulation, humanitarian framing, and significant cultural influence in shaping Western understandings of Afghanistan during the Taliban era. The text serves as a rich site for examining how fictional narratives translate real-world cultural experiences for an international audience. Important narrative units including character descriptions, dialogues, representations of gender norms, depictions of Islamic practices, and portrayals of conflict are identified as key data points for discourse examination. These textual elements are analyzed to reveal how cultural meanings are constructed, negotiated, simplified, or reframed.

The methodological foundation relies on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, which involves: (1) **textual analysis** of vocabulary, grammar, tone, and narrative choices; (2) **analysis of discursive practice**, focusing on production, distribution, and consumption of the text, especially in Western humanitarian contexts; and (3) **analysis of social practice**, examining how the novel reflects and reproduces broader socio-political ideologies about Afghanistan, gender, and conflict. Van Dijk's concept of ideological discourse structures and Wodak's discourse-historical approach further guide the interpretation of implicit power relations and cultural framing within the narrative.

In addition, postcolonial translation theory is used as an interpretive tool to assess how cultural elements are represented or transformed. Concepts such as hybridity, cultural mediation, subaltern representation, and colonial translation practices help identify where the narrative negotiates authentic cultural detail and where it reinforces Western-centric perspectives. This dual lens allows for a nuanced examination of both the linguistic mechanisms and the cultural politics of representation.

To ensure analytical rigor, the study follows a systematic process of coding textual instances related to culture, gender, power, and ideology. These coded data are interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework, enabling the identification of recurring discursive patterns. The methodology thus combines close reading, thematic coding, and critical theoretical interpretation to provide an in-depth understanding of how *The Breadwinner* participates in the politics of cultural translation.

Cultural Translation in *the Breadwinner*

Cultural translation in *The Breadwinner* operates at the intersection of narrative mediation and ideological framing, as Deborah Ellis attempts to make Afghan cultural realities accessible to a global, predominantly Western readership. The novel presents a war-torn, patriarchal society through simplified yet compelling depictions of daily life under the Taliban. This process of translating Afghan culture often necessitates selecting certain cultural practices such as purdah, gender segregation, dress codes, and family structures and rendering them through explanatory narration or descriptive detail. By doing so, Ellis positions herself as a mediator between Afghan lived experience and the expectations of an international audience unfamiliar with the socio-historical context. These translation choices serve to illuminate the harshness of Taliban rule but also shape the limits of what the reader understands about Afghanistan.

At the same time, the novel frequently relies on narrative strategies that translate culturally specific concepts into universal themes such as survival, courage, and family bonds. This universalizing tendency softens cultural distance and fosters empathy, making complex socio-political realities more approachable for young readers. However, such translation often comes at the cost of collapsing intricate cultural nuances into more generalizable human experiences. Practices like traditional Afghan gender roles or Islamic customs are framed in a way that emphasizes their emotional impact rather than their historical or religious significance. While this enhances readability, it also risks presenting Afghan culture as monolithic or static, reinforcing a simplified cultural identity that aligns with humanitarian storytelling conventions.

A key component of Ellis's cultural translation lies in her portrayal of Afghan girlhood. Parvana's transformation into a breadwinner by disguising herself as a boy is presented as both an act of resistance and an entry point for readers to understand the oppressive social structures governing Afghan women's movement and agency. The cultural translation here operates through contrast: Afghan girlhood is depicted as severely restricted, while the act of cross-dressing functions as a metaphor for empowerment. The narrative foregrounds the resilience of Afghan girls, yet the framing subtly reinforces the binary of oppressed non-Western women versus liberating Western values. This aligns with what postcolonial scholars identify as the problem of translating female subaltern experiences into narratives shaped by Western feminist expectations.

Moreover, cultural translation in *The Breadwinner* is shaped by the novel's humanitarian purpose. The text seeks to raise awareness about conditions in Afghanistan and generate empathy, which influences how cultural information is selected and organized. Scenes of brutality beatings, public punishments, restrictions on education are portrayed with clarity and emotional weight to emphasize urgency and injustice. While these depictions are grounded in historical realities, their prominence over other cultural dimensions like Afghan hospitality, poetry, or everyday communal life produces a culturally skewed representation focused almost exclusively on suffering. This imbalance, though effective for advocacy, risks reducing Afghan culture to a narrative of victimhood.

Finally, the cultural translation in the novel is shaped by an external, Western perspective that mediates Afghan experience from the outside-in. Although Ellis conducted interviews with Afghan refugees, the novel still reflects the limitations of representing a culturally distant community through second-hand sources and humanitarian frameworks. The translation of Afghan culture is therefore filtered through narrative choices that prioritize clarity, emotional impact, and accessibility over ethnographic accuracy. This creates a cultural narrative that is simultaneously informative and reductive illuminating Afghan realities while reinforcing familiar Western imaginaries of war, oppression, and resilience.

Discourses of Power and Representation

Discourses of power in *The Breadwinner* are constructed through linguistic and narrative strategies that foreground hierarchical relationships between the Taliban, Afghan civilians, and particularly women and children. The novel repeatedly situates authority within rigid, male-dominated structures enforced through violence, surveillance, and control of public spaces. These depictions function as discursive markers that shape Western perceptions of Afghanistan as a landscape defined primarily by oppression. The Taliban are portrayed through a lexicon of domination "orders," "punishments," "beatings," "threats" which positions them unequivocally as agents of absolute authoritarian power. Such linguistic choices reinforce a binary between the oppressor and the oppressed, leaving limited space for nuance or internal diversity within Afghan society. Through this framing, power becomes a central representational discourse that guides the reader's emotional and moral orientation toward the narrative.

A significant dimension of power representation emerges in the novel's depiction of gendered oppression. Afghan women's mobility, identity, and autonomy are shaped by strict social codes that the narrative presents as pervasive and unquestioned. Women are shown as invisible in public spheres and dependent on male guardians for basic survival. While these portrayals reflect certain historical realities, their dominance in the narrative risks reinforcing homogenized images of Afghan womanhood as uniformly oppressed. Parvana's forced confinement within domestic spaces and her eventual transformation into a boy to navigate the public sphere serve as key narrative devices illustrating gendered power. These representational choices highlight the systemic nature of patriarchal control but simultaneously align with Western feminist discourses that often frame non-Western women as victims requiring liberation. Thus, the novel's gender representation both critiques the

oppressive conditions and inadvertently supports familiar Western narratives of the “voiceless” subaltern female.

Another crucial layer of power representation is tied to how Afghan identity itself is constructed. The narrative frequently positions Afghan civilians as passive recipients of violence, humanitarian aid, or political decisions made by distant powers. This discursive pattern places Afghan people within the global hierarchy as subjects to be helped, studied, or rescued. The absence of detailed cultural self-representation such as community agency, everyday joys, or diverse ideological viewpoints further reinforces this external gaze. As a result, Afghan identity is shaped within the novel less by internal cultural dynamics and more by external conflict and suffering. This representational imbalance aligns with what critics describe as the humanitarian gaze, where narratives emphasize trauma to evoke empathy in global audiences, often simplifying the cultural complexity of the represented community.

The novel also constructs power through the representation of knowledge and voice. Parvana though an Afghan girl is framed through an authorial voice that retains distance from the cultural context it describes. The narrative frequently explains cultural practices for the benefit of the international reader, positioning the Western audience as the primary interpretive authority. This explanatory tone, though helpful for comprehension, subtly reinforces power asymmetry by privileging external understanding over internal cultural expression. The voice of the Afghan characters, including Parvana, is therefore mediated and filtered through a Western lens, highlighting Spivak’s argument that the subaltern rarely speaks directly but is spoken for through dominant discourses of representation.

Finally, resistance as a counter-discourse to power is also central to the narrative. Parvana’s actions working in the marketplace, reading letters, helping strangers, and disguising herself function as symbolic acts of defiance within the oppressive socio-political environment. These moments offer glimpses of agency and resilience that complicate the novel’s otherwise bleak portrayal of power dynamics. Yet even these acts of resistance are framed within the humanitarian narrative structure, emphasizing personal courage over collective socio-political change. This framing maintains the novel’s focus on individual heroism rather than systemic transformation, reflecting a common narrative pattern in Western representations of non-Western conflicts.

Language, Ideology, and Narrative Strategies

The language of *The Breadwinner* plays a central role in shaping the ideological contours of the narrative, guiding readers toward specific interpretations of Afghan culture, gender dynamics, and political authority. Ellis employs clear, accessible vocabulary that reflects the text’s intended young readership, yet this simplicity carries ideological weight. Words associated with the Taliban such as “harsh,” “cruel,” “strict,” or “fear” are consistently negative, reinforcing an unambiguous moral dichotomy between oppressors and oppressed. Conversely, descriptions of Parvana’s family emphasize tenderness and resilience, creating a narrative polarity that situates Afghan civilians as inherently vulnerable and morally upright. Although such language effectively communicates emotional urgency, it also produces a representational imbalance that aligns with Western humanitarian narratives emphasizing victimhood.

Ideology is further embedded in the narrative through selective cultural framing. Afghan customs, religious practices, and gender norms are often explained through an externalized narrative voice that assumes the reader’s unfamiliarity. This pedagogical tone not only reflects the author’s intention to inform but also positions the Western reader as the interpretive center. Such explanatory strategies indicate what postcolonial theorists identify as the ideological act of cultural translation, where the represented culture is framed through the expectations and assumptions of a global audience. Moments where Islamic practices are referenced such as prayer rituals, dress codes, or modesty norms

are narrated with emphasis on restriction rather than spirituality or cultural meaning, subtly reinforcing a Western secular perspective.

Narrative strategies in the novel also work to foreground individual resilience as a primary means of survival. Parvana's acts cutting her hair, navigating the market, reading letters for strangers, and helping displaced individuals are framed as personal triumphs against systemic oppression. While these moments highlight her agency, they also shift attention away from broader social structures, reducing complex socio-political realities to individualized moral struggles. This narrative emphasis aligns with Western conventions of children's literature, where protagonists often overcome adversity through determination and courage. However, in a postcolonial context, this strategy risks simplifying collective experiences of war and displacement into personal stories of heroism.

The use of descriptive imagery and metaphor in *The Breadwinner* also contributes to ideological framing. Imagery associated with Afghanistan often evokes scenes of desolation dusty streets, ruins, empty shops, and silent homes constructing a landscape of decay that mirrors the political turmoil. Such imagery reinforces the perception of Afghanistan as a space defined primarily by destruction, overshadowing cultural richness, community resilience, and historical complexity. Symbolic elements, such as Parvana's transformation into a boy, serve dual functions: they highlight gender inequality while simultaneously reinforcing the narrative trope that empowerment is achieved through adopting masculine identity markers. This symbolic strategy exposes the ideological assumption that freedom is aligned with maleness, a trope critiqued in feminist literary and postcolonial studies.

Point of view also shapes the ideological dynamics of the narrative. Although the story centers on Parvana, the third-person narrative voice retains a degree of detachment, enabling it to explain cultural practices and political events from an external perspective. This narrative distance, while useful for clarity, echoes Spivak's argument about the mediated voice of the subaltern where marginalized characters' experiences are filtered through a Western interpretive lens. The narrative does not allow Afghan cultural insiders to articulate their own perspectives directly; instead, meaning is structured for a global readership. In this sense, language operates as an ideological tool that both reveals and regulates cultural knowledge.

Finally, the narrative strategy of aligning the reader emotionally with Parvana's experiences serves a dual ideological purpose. On one hand, it fosters empathy, enabling readers to connect with the emotional and psychological toll of living under Taliban rule. On the other hand, it reinforces the humanitarian logic that frames non-Western suffering as a consumable narrative for global audiences. The novel's emotional appeal becomes part of its ideological function, shaping how readers understand Afghanistan not through political or historical complexity, but through individualized trauma and resilience. This emotionalized narrative strategy reflects broader patterns in humanitarian literature, where affective storytelling operates alongside cultural translation to produce specific political meanings.

Conclusion

The analysis of language, ideology, and narrative strategies in *The Breadwinner* reveals how Deborah Ellis constructs a carefully mediated representation of Afghanistan that aligns with broader patterns of Western humanitarian storytelling. The linguistic choices throughout the novel characterized by simplified vocabulary and moral polarity serve not only to make the narrative accessible for young readers but also to subtly shape ideological perceptions. By consistently associating the Taliban with fear, brutality, and oppression, and juxtaposing them with the tenderness and moral integrity of Parvana's family, the text establishes a binary worldview that reinforces familiar Western narratives of victimhood and tyranny. While this contributes to emotional clarity and reader engagement, it inevitably reduces the complex socio-political realities of Afghanistan to easily digestible moral positions.

The narrative's pedagogical tone, particularly in its explanations of Afghan cultural and religious practices, illustrates an underlying assumption of Western readership. Through this mode of cultural translation, Afghan life becomes framed through externalized interpretive lenses, echoing concerns raised in postcolonial theory regarding the mediation and simplification of non-Western experiences. Religious rituals, gender norms, and everyday customs are frequently presented in terms of restriction rather than cultural or spiritual depth, thereby reinforcing secular Western interpretive frameworks. This strategy renders the Afghan context legible to global audiences but risks flattening cultural specificity.

Moreover, the narrative emphasis on individual resilience foregrounds Parvana's agency while simultaneously obscuring the systemic and structural dimensions of oppression. Acts of courage cutting her hair, assuming male disguise, earning a livelihood are framed as personal triumphs, reflecting conventional tropes of children's literature centered on heroic protagonists. However, such individualization diverts attention from collective suffering, historical forces, and political complexity. In a postcolonial context, this narrative narrowing simplifies the lived realities of conflict and displacement into stories of personal endurance.

Imagery and symbolism further reinforce ideological framing. Afghanistan is often depicted as a landscape of ruin dust, silence, destruction producing a visual rhetoric of despair that overshadows the nation's cultural richness and resilience. Symbolic transformations, such as Parvana's adoption of a male identity, illustrate gender inequality but simultaneously echo the problematic notion that empowerment is tied to masculine-coded autonomy. These narrative and symbolic constructions illuminate how ideological assumptions can become embedded in literary representations of conflict zones.

Finally, the narrative voice rooted in detached third-person perspective filters Afghan experiences through an external lens. This dynamic resonates with Spivak's argument about the mediated voice of the subaltern, where marginalized subjects do not speak fully for themselves but are interpreted for global consumption. The emotional alignment that the novel fosters with Parvana's struggles, while powerful and compassionate, operates within a humanitarian logic that renders suffering into an affective experience for distant readers. Such emotionalization, though effective in generating empathy, contributes to a narrative economy in which trauma becomes the primary lens through which non-Western contexts are understood.

Overall, the interplay of language, ideology, and narrative strategies in *The Breadwinner* reveals a complex tension between advocacy and representation. While Ellis's narrative succeeds in raising awareness about the hardships faced by Afghan civilians under Taliban rule, it simultaneously participates in representational practices that simplify cultural realities and reinforce Western interpretive frames. Recognizing these ideological underpinnings is essential for understanding the broader dynamics of humanitarian literature, particularly its role in shaping global perceptions of conflict, gender, and cultural identity.

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