

## The Importance of Recognizing Discourse and Nodal Point of the Text in Translation, Based on Colman Barks' Translation of the Masnavi of Molana

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### Abstract

As the most well-known translator of Rumi in the United States, Coleman Barks is not without criticism. Due to many deviations and alterations to the original text, his translations have undergone harsh criticism by literary critics. Coleman Barks' critics have considered different reasons for his alterations to the works of Rumi, the most important of which is his lack of knowledge over Farsi language. Other reasons include not paying attention to the culture and religion of Rumi and a biased distortion of Islamic elements. In this research we provide evidence against the above claims. Based on the Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's Discourse Theory and their notion of "Nodal Point" we have shown that the most fundamental mistake of Coleman Barks is to misrecognize the Nodal Point in the source text and considering all of them to be the same in all Rumi's works. This has led to a deconstruction of the allegories and has turned the characters in the Masnavi, Quranic stories, mystical symbols and rituals into actual things, physical deeds, and historical figures, resulting in an inevitable distortion by Coleman Barks. Based on his own discourse and the discourse of his audience, he has tried to invent justifications, new themes, and explanations for the poetry of Rumi. To prove this hypothesis, we have analyzed his translations of Rumi's "Story of The Reed", "The People of the Cave", his views on Jesus in the poetry of Rumi, and his description of the whirling dance "Sama".

**Keywords:** Rumi, Coleman Barks, Discourse Analysis, Nodal Point, Laclau and Mouffe

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## 1. Introduction

Today, Barks' translations are the best-selling translations of Rumi's works. They have been translated into more than twenty languages worldwide, and it can be said that many in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries know Rumi through the eyes of Barks. Numerous publications by Barks and the remarkable success of his work have naturally attracted the attention of critics. Iranian and foreign critics agree on the fact that there are obvious differences between the well-known Rumi as the East knows him and Barks' Rumi. Barks' translations portray Rumi as a modern age guru beyond or rather free from any religion or culture. The differences are to the extent that cannot always be dismissed by merely calling them a tasteful artistic alteration or a mistake. Some critics, e.g., Lahouti believes Barks has purposely distorted the poetry of Rumi since many of Barks' deviations are towards verses with religious content.

There are various assumptions about Barks' acquisitions. Based on each of these hypotheses, critics have criticized one or more of Barks' poems, but what is missing from these critiques is a comprehensive hypothesis that can be used to explain the totality of Coleman Barks' works. By examining unprecedented evidence from Barks' translations, we will provide a more encompassing reason for his deviations to the original poetry using the idea of nodal point from Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory.

### Research Questions

This study intends to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the scope of Coleman Barks' alterations and are the critics accusations valid?
- 2) Are Barks' alterations intentional and biased or can they be explained by a more comprehensive theory?
- 3) Can Laclau and Mouffe's idea of discourse and nodal point explain the reason behind Coleman Barks' alterations to Rumi's Poetry?

The main hypothesis of this research in answering the above questions is that although Coleman Barks' biases and lack of knowledge play a role in his changes to the poetry of Rumi, it is his misrecognition of the nodal point, ignoring Rumi's discourse, and prioritizing his discourse over Rumi's, that has led to the majority of alterations.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Translation Criticism: Coleman Barks

A few papers have considered Coleman Barks' free renderings of Rumi worthy of criticism. Hassan Lahouti's articles and interviews suggest that Coleman Barks has purposely distorted Rumi's poetry for political and religious reasons. (Lahouti, 2015 pp. 50-53). Omid Azadibougar and Simon Patton discuss the translatability of literature and culture, challenges to world literature in translation, and the popularity of this version of Rumi in the USA. (Azadibougar and Patton, 2015 pp. 172-189)

Nonetheless, research in this field has mostly applied the criteria of literature criticism to translation criticism and lacks a scientific wholistic view on the matter free from political, cultural and religious biases. In this paper we first, analyzed many examples from his most important popular translation "The Essential Rumi". Second, by taking a discourse theory approach we have examined what has been so far regarded as biased distortions in translation in a new light.

### 2.2. Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory: Nodal Point

Although Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory mainly deals with political applications of discourse, recent research has broadened its application to art and literature as well. For example, Ricardo Camargo in "Rethinking the Political: A Genealogy of the "Antagonism" in Carl Schmitt through the Lens

of Laclau-Mouffe-Žižek” (2015) presents a nonpolitical application of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory. In this paper we have shown how the correct recognition of “Nodal Point” can determine the validity of a literary translation. A discourse is formed by the partial fixation of meaning around certain Nodal Points (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 112). A nodal point is a privileged sign around which the other signs are ordered; the other signs acquire their meaning from their relationship to the nodal point. (Jorgenson and Phillips 2008, p 26).

### 3. Methodology

This is qualitative research using a descriptive-analytical method of study. The data has been cited from the verses of Molana in the Masnavi and their equivalent in Barks’ translations in “The Essential Rumi”. Data has been collected through library research.

### 4. Conclusion

This study shows that Islamophobia, lack of familiarity with the Persian language, or other biases which critics have suggested as some of the main reasons for Bark’s alleged distortions, although not completely ruled out, is not the main reason for his numerous alterations to Rumi’s poetry. Using the perspectives of discourse analysis and the idea of “Nodal Point” in Laclau and Mouffe’s Theory, we find that a correct understanding of the discourse of the text in the source language and recognizing its nodal point is the main step in translation, the misdiagnosis of which turns into error, alteration, and distortion in the translation.

Lack of a coherent theme behind the poem or the book in translation, deconstruction of allegories and adding to or reducing from the text in order to fit it into the translation’s presumptions and discourse are the main consequences of the translator's misunderstanding of the dominant discourse

of the text in translation and its nodal point. This mainly leads to the ignoring of religious-Quranic discourse and mystical elements as the main discourse of the spiritual Masnavi which is based on the Quranic teachings applied to the mystical journey. Preferring his own discourse and assumption that Rumi is beyond religion and culture, the translator omits some parts of the source text and concepts and provides objective translations and interpretations of Rumi's poetry instead.

