

TRANSLATION STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE: A HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL SURVEY

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Abstract:

Translation Studies has evolved from a marginal, practice-oriented activity into a robust, interdisciplinary field that critically interrogates the linguistic, cultural, and political dimensions of cross-lingual transfer. Within the ambit of English literature, translation has played a decisive—though often under acknowledged—role in shaping the canon, enabling literary innovation, and negotiating postcolonial identity. This paper traces the historical trajectory of translation in English literary history, from its foundational role in religious and classical dissemination to its institutionalization as an academic discipline in the late 20th century. It examines key theoretical paradigms—including equivalence theory, descriptive translation studies, polysystem theory, and the domestication/foreignization binary—and highlights the transformative impact of postcolonial and feminist interventions. Special attention is given to the contributions of Indian bilingual writers like Dilip Chitre, whose translational praxis exemplifies a decolonial, culturally embedded model. By synthesizing historical overview with critical theory, this paper argues that translation is not ancillary to English literature but constitutive of its very formation and global mobility.

Key Words: *Translation Studies, English literature, equivalence, domestication, foreignization, postcolonial translation, Dilip Chitre, polysystem theory, cultural turn, literary canon.*

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Introduction:

Translation is as old as language itself, yet its systematic study—as Translation Studies (TS)—is relatively recent. While early translation in English literature served primarily utilitarian or devotional ends (e.g., biblical and classical texts), it gradually emerged as a creative and contested site of meaning-making. As one scholar notes, “translation studies started in Ancient Greece although there is no written proof of it”, but its formalization as a discipline began only in the mid-20th century. In the Anglophone context, TS gained academic legitimacy with James S. Holmes’s seminal 1972 paper “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies,” which proposed a comprehensive map of the field, distinguishing descriptive, theoretical, and applied branches. This paper situates Translation Studies within English literary history, tracing its evolution and highlighting its critical interventions.

The history of translation in English literature is punctuated by landmark projects that reshaped literary sensibilities. The first “fine translations into English” are attributed to Geoffrey Chaucer, who rendered the Roman de la Rose and Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy in the 14th century, thereby importing continental allegory and philosophical discourse into English. The 16th and 17th centuries witnessed an explosion of classical translation: Chapman’s Homer, Florio’s Montaigne, and above all, the King James Bible (1611)—a collaborative masterpiece that profoundly influenced English syntax, diction, and literary rhythm.

The 18th century privileged fluency and naturalization, epitomized by Alexander Pope’s heavily adapted Iliad—a model later critiqued as “domesticating.” By contrast, the Romantic period revived interest in fidelity and foreignness: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and

later Matthew Arnold championed formal equivalence, with Arnold famously demanding that Homer be translated “nobly plain and direct.” In the 20th century, modernist translators like Ezra Pound (Cathay) and T.S. Eliot redefined translation as creative appropriation, prioritizing poetic effect over philological accuracy. As noted in a review, “translation has evolved from ancient Roman practices to a complex interdisciplinary field”, increasingly responsive to socio-political contexts.

The institutionalization of Translation Studies coincided with a shift from prescriptive equivalence-based models (e.g., Nida’s formal vs. dynamic equivalence) to descriptive, culturally situated approaches.

Gideon Toury pioneered Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), advocating for empirical analysis of actual translations as cultural facts. For Toury, norms—not rules—govern translational choices, and translations must be studied within their target-system context.

Susan Bassnett, often called the “mother of translation studies,” co-authored *Translation, History and Culture* (1990) with André Lefevere, catalysing the cultural turn. She argued that “translation is not a secondary activity but a central mode of cultural production” and that texts circulate not in isolation but within polysystems—hierarchical networks of literary genres and norms.

Lawrence Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility* (1995) introduced the pivotal binary of domestication (erasing linguistic/cultural difference to suit target norms) and foreignization (retaining source-text strangeness to resist ethnocentrism). Venuti, himself a translator from Italian, indicted Anglo-American publishing for enforcing fluent domestication, thereby marginalizing the foreign and the translator.

These theorists collectively dismantled the myth of translational neutrality, positioning translation as an

ideologically charged act of rewriting.

Postcolonial translation theory challenges the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in traditional TS models. Scholars like Tejaswini Niranjana (*Siting Translation*, 1992) and Maria Tymoczko exposed how colonial translation practices functioned as tools of epistemic violence—flattening indigenous epistemologies into Western frameworks. As one study notes, “postcolonial theories have made it very clear that we need to rethink the history of translation and the politics of translation”.

In the Indian context, translation assumes special significance due to multilingualism and the legacy of English as both colonial imposition and post-independence literary medium. Here, Dilip Chitre (1938–2009) emerges as a paradigmatic figure. A bilingual poet-translator, Chitre rendered Tukaram’s abhangas in *Says Tuka* (1991), not as scholarly exegesis but as creative re-embodiment. He rejected exoticizing or archaizing strategies, instead deploying stark, contemporary English to preserve Tukaram’s spiritual urgency and social critique.

Critically, Chitre viewed translation as existential integration: “translation makes a bridge within himself and [between] India or Europe; or else he became a fragmented person”. His approach exemplifies what scholars term the “Indian translating sensibility”—where multilingualism is constitutive, not supplementary. For Chitre, to translate was “to create an unprecedented linguistic texture and canvas in a target language”, aligning with Venuti’s call for visibility while resisting Western theoretical hegemony.

His self-translation practice—rendering his Marathi poems into English and vice versa—further destabilizes the source/target hierarchy, revealing translation as intra-cultural dialogue rather than unidirectional transfer.

Today, Translation Studies intersects with digital humanities (machine translation, corpus analysis), gender studies (feminist translation), and eco-criticism (translating indigenous ecological knowledge). The rise of world literature in English has intensified debates about linguistic hegemony: as English becomes the lingua franca of global publishing, non-English literatures are increasingly accessible only via English translation—raising concerns about representational distortion and market-driven selection.

Yet, the field remains vibrantly self-reflexive. Venuti himself now calls for “translation changes everything”—a rallying cry for recognizing translation’s agency in reshaping knowledge, identity, and power. Meanwhile, scholars advocate for translational justice: equitable recognition of translators, support for minor-language literatures, and pedagogical inclusion of translation in literary curricula.

Conclusion:

Translation Studies has irrevocably transformed our understanding of English literature—not as a monolithic, autochthonous tradition, but as a dynamic,

polyglot formation shaped by centuries of translational exchange. From Chaucer’s appropriations to Chitre’s decolonial re-voicing’s, translation has been instrumental in expanding literary horizons, challenging linguistic purism, and enabling cross-cultural critique. As the field continues to evolve, its core mandate remains urgent: to make visible the labour of mediation, to interrogate the politics of representation, and to affirm that all literature—especially English literature—is, in some profound sense, always already translated.

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