

## Translation as Cultural Praxis : From Linguistic approach to Transformative Practice

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### Abstract

This article argues for a reconceptualization of translation as cultural praxis—an active, transformative practice that engages with the dynamics of culture, identity, and power. Moving beyond traditional, language-centered models, I trace the trajectory of the cultural turn in translation studies, drawing on the foundational contributions of Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere, Maeve Olohan and the concept of translations Kultur, and the postcolonial interventions of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. The discussion then examines how translation functions as a form of cultural resistance, particularly in postcolonial contexts, and as a key agent mediating the asymmetrical flows of globalization. Finally, I address the political and ethical dimensions of this practice, arguing that translator agency and a commitment to horizontal cross-cultural dialogue are essential if translation is to serve as a genuinely transformative cultural praxis. The article concludes that translation is not merely a bridge between languages but a critical site where cultural meanings are negotiated and transformed.

**Keywords:** translation, cultural praxis, cultural turn, postcolonial translation, cultural resistance, globalization, agency

### Introduction

For much of its history, translation was conceived as a derivative activity, a secondary act of linguistic transfer whose primary goal was fidelity to an original. In such a framework, the translator was a transparent conduit, and cultural content was something to be faithfully delivered, not interrogated or transformed. However, over the past three decades, a fundamental shift has reconfigured the field: the recognition of translation as cultural praxis. This perspective understands translation not as a neutral linguistic operation but as an active, situated practice that participates in the production and negotiation of culture itself. “Translation scholars have for a long time been arguing in favour of a shift in paradigms to redefine the relationship between translation and the spreading of knowledge”. This insight pushes translation studies beyond the formal constraints of language into the dynamic and contested terrain of cultural politics.

In a globalized world, where information flows across borders at unprecedented speeds, MT plays a critical role in bridging linguistic divides. From international diplomacy and business to education and social media, AI-driven translation tools have become indispensable. Applications like real-time translation apps, multilingual chat systems, and automated subtitling illustrate the widespread integration of MT into everyday life

India’s intellectual and cultural history is deeply rooted in its multilingual fabric. With hundreds of languages and dialects, the transmission of knowledge across regions has always depended on translation. Unlike monolingual societies, India developed a tradition where knowledge was constantly reinterpreted through linguistic shifts. Translation, therefore, is not a secondary activity but central to the evolution of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).

Indian Knowledge Systems refer to the vast body of knowledge developed in the Indian subcontinent, including Vedic literature, philosophical treatises, scientific texts like Ayurveda and Jyotisha, epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and diverse oral traditions. These systems are not static; they evolve through reinterpretation, commentary, and translation.

Terms like Dharma, Karma, Moksha, and Rasa do not have direct equivalents in English. Translators often face the challenge of choosing between approximation and explanation. This process reveals that translation is interpretative and subjective

This article explores the theoretical foundations of translation as cultural praxis, examining its implications for how we understand meaning, identity, and power in a globalized world, and grounds the discussion in practical examples where translators have acted as agents of cultural transformation.

### Theoretical Foundations: The Cultural Turn

The most decisive theoretical break from linguistic models was the “cultural turn” in translation studies, formally announced by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere in 1990. Bassnett and Lefevere argued that translation studies had to “escape the cage of language” and engage with the broader cultural and social contexts in which translation operates. They shifted attention from questions of equivalence to questions of power, ideology, and institutional influence. Lefevere’s concept of “rewriting” was crucial here: all translations are rewritings of originals, and as such, they are subject to the constraints of patronage, poetics, and ideology. A translated text is never a transparent reflection but always a cultural construction. Translation is central to the survival and evolution of Indian Knowledge Systems. It acts as a bridge between languages, cultures, and epistemologies. However, translation is not neutral; it shapes knowledge and reflects power dynamics. To fully realize the potential of Indian Knowledge Systems, it is essential to adopt inclusive, ethical, and decolonized translation practices.

By rethinking translation as a transformative process, we can ensure that indigenous knowledge thrives in a globalized world while retaining its cultural integrity.

The cultural turn was about recognizing that translation shapes, and is shaped by, the power dynamics of the societies in which it occurs. This insight was deepened by the “sociological turn” in the discipline. Maeve Olohan, in her systematic application of practice theory to translation, has shown that translation is “a practice deeply embedded in the social world” and that translators display “norm-governed behaviour in particular socio-cultural contexts”. Similarly, the concept of translations Kultur (translation culture) theorizes translation as “a self-referential, self-regulating subsystem of culture, characterized by a set of socially established norms and behaviours shared by individuals involved in translation”. These frameworks emphasize that translation occurs within structured social fields, governed by tacit rules, and implicated in larger cultural struggles.

### **Postcolonial Interventions: Translation, Identity, and Power**

Postcolonial translation theory represents one of the most influential emerging trends. It challenges the assumption that translation is neutral. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that translation must be attentive to the “rhetoricity of the original” and the politics of representation (Spivak 180). In colonial contexts, translation often functioned as a tool of domination, reshaping colonized texts to fit Western frameworks.

Tejaswini Niranjana asserts that colonial translation practices constructed the colonized subject as inferior and static (Niranjana 3). Thus, translation historically participated in knowledge production aligned with imperial power.

In the case of Godaan,

English translations may Simplify caste realities for Western readers Reduce rural complexities into “exotic India” Modify ideological critique of colonial economy Homi Bhabha’s concept of “cultural hybridity” is useful here (Bhabha 37). Translation creates hybrid texts that exist between languages and cultures. The translated Godaan becomes neither fully Indian nor fully Western; it becomes a negotiated space.

Nowhere is the political and cultural significance of translation more evident than in postcolonial contexts. In the asymmetrical contact zones between colonizer and colonized, translation has been both an instrument of domination and a tool of resistance. Translation functions as intercultural political textual communication, operating “at the intersection of culture, meaning and language”. Colonial powers often used translation to appropriate, classify, and control indigenous knowledge systems. Yet, postcolonial translators and writers have repurposed translation to challenge these very structures of domination.

Homi Bhabha’s concept of “cultural translation” provides a powerful theoretical lens. Bhabha expands translation beyond linguistic transfer to describe the condition of global migration and cultural exchange. He defines translation as “the performative nature of cultural communication” that generates hybrid identities and spaces of “in-betweenness”. In the postcolonial immigrant narrative, as seen in the work of Jamaica Kincaid and Salman Rushdie, characters find themselves as “translated men,” living across cultural borders and resisting simplistic forms of assimilation.

This perspective challenges the binary logic of cultural purity and assimilation. A paper on translation as a critique of “cultural sameness” reframes the Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad’s concept of “imagined sameness”—the assumption that social belonging requires a shared cultural origin. The author argues that “we do not have to have the same cultural background in order to be able to live together. Translation through its practices thus articulates how equality and difference can be possible at the same time”. Translation becomes a model for living with difference without erasing it.

### **Agency, Activism, and the Politics of Resistance**

If translation is cultural praxis, then translators are not passive conduits but active agents. In an era of social justice movements, migration crises, and global inequality, translators and interpreters are increasingly embracing a self-consciously activist role. A growing body of scholarship frames translation as “a site of agency and activism,” bringing to light “translation work and translation networks created to support a culture of change across the world”. This research emphasizes “the role played by translation as agent of resistance and change of the dynamics between gender, class, race and power”.

Strategies of cultural resistance take many forms. The theorist Lawrence Venuti famously advocated for “resistant translation” in the form of foreignization against the dominant practice of domestication, which he argued erases the foreignness of the source text in service of Anglo-American cultural hegemony. In postcolonial settings, Michael Cronin points to more aggressive forms of resistance: “the ways in which originals can be manipulated, invented, or substituted, or the status of the original subverted in order to frustrate the intelligence-gathering activities of the Imperial Agent”.

Alongside these subversive strategies, untranslatability itself is reclaimed as a form of decolonial resistance. The refusal to find neat equivalents in a colonial language can be a powerful assertion of ontological and epistemic difference, serving as “a means to challenge hegemonic power structures and promote linguistic diversity,” forming “a gnoseology that functions as an alternative form of knowledge resisting Western epistemology”.

### **Globalization, Cultural Flows, and the Ethics of Praxis**

In a profoundly interconnected world, globalization has intensified the cultural work that translation performs, while also exposing deep asymmetries. The global circulation of texts is far from equal. Postcolonial English functions as a “master language” in a highly uneven system where “asymmetrical power relationship(s) between the various local vernaculars and the one master-language” structure what gets translated, by whom, and with what reach. Michael Cronin notably challenges the metaphor of translation as a neutral “bridge,” preferring instead the image of a river. Translation should be understood as “a river that runs from bank to bank, evading rocks, travelling far and wide and connecting people on a deep under-surface level, not a superficial one”. This fluid metaphor captures the uneven, unpredictable, and often hidden nature of cultural flows.

This power-laden context imposes a profound ethical responsibility on translators. It is impossible to remain neutral in a field structured by hierarchies. A commitment to cultural praxis demands reflexivity about one’s own positionality and attention to the potential consequences of translation choices. The ethical translator recognizes that every decision creates meaning and shapes intercultural understanding. As a recent study emphasizes, it is the translator who occupies “the culture–meaning–language nexus” and who must “mediate unbiased textual representation of cultural realities and identities,” with the aim of contributing “to intercultural understanding and, potentially, to intercultural cooperation”. Ethical praxis is essential for promoting horizontal, reciprocal dialogue and challenging simplified binaries.

### **Conclusion**

Translation is cultural praxis: an active, transformative, and deeply political practice that shapes the world rather than merely reflecting it. The cultural turn, postcolonial interventions, and the sociological and activist turns have all contributed to a richer understanding of translation as a site of identity construction, power negotiation, and ethical encounter.

From this perspective, the translator is not a servant but an agent; not a shadow but a shaper; not a bridge but a river. As the world becomes ever more interconnected and yet ever more fractured, the praxis of translation will only grow in importance. The challenge going forward is to cultivate a critical, reflexive, and ethically committed translation practice—one that recognizes the power inherent in every choice of word and syntax, and that embraces translation as a genuine mode of cultural transformation. By recognizing translation as cultural praxis, we unlock its potential to not only move across cultural boundaries, but to transform them. In a world of global flows and persistent inequalities, this is not merely an academic insight but an urgent practical imperative.

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