**Postcolonial Translation Theory**

In *Translation and Gender,* Sherry Simon’s focus centres on underlining the importance of the cultural turn in translation. In the conclusion, she insists on how ‘contemporary feminist translation has made gender the site of a consciously transformative project, one which reframes conditions of textual authority’ (1996: 167) and summarizes the contribution of cultural studies to translation as follows:

Cultural studies brings to translation an understanding of the complexities of gender and culture. It allows us to situate linguistic transfer within the multiple ‘post’ realities of today: poststructuralism, postcolonialism and postmodernism. (Simon 1996: 136)

In recent years it is in fact postcolonialism that has attracted the attention of many translation studies researchers. Though its specific scope is sometimes undefined, [postcolonialism](https://literariness.org/category/postcolonialism/) is generally used to cover studies of the history of the former colonies, studies of powerful European empires, resistance to the colonialist powers and, more broadly, studies of the effect of the imbalance of power relations between colonized and colonizer. The consequent crossover between different contemporary disciplines can be seen by the fact that essays by Simon and by Lefevere appear in collections of postcolonial writings on translation, and Simon herself makes extensive reference to the postcolonialist Spivak. In particular, Simon highlights (pp. 145–7) Spivak’s concerns about the ideological consequences of the translation of ‘Third World’ literature into English and the distortion this entails. Spivak has addressed these questions in her seminal essay ‘The politics of translation’ (1993/2004), which brings together feminist, postcolonialist and poststructuralist approaches. Tensions between the different approaches are highlighted, with Spivak speaking out against western feminists who expect feminist writing from outside Europe to be translated into the language of power, English. Such translation, in Spivak’s view, is often expressed in ‘translatese’, which eliminates the identity of politically less powerful individuals and cultures:

In the act of wholesale translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature of the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translatese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan. (Spivak: 1993/2004: 371–2)

Spivak’s critique of western feminism and publishing is most biting when she suggests (p. 379) that feminists from the hegemonic countries should show real solidarity with women in postcolonial contexts by learning the language in which those women speak and write. In Spivak’s opinion, the ‘politics of translation’ currently gives prominence to English and the other ‘hegemonic’ languages of the ex-colonizers. Translations into these languages from Bengali too often fail to translate the difference of the Bengali view because the translator, albeit with good intentions, over-assimilates it to make it accessible to the western readers. Spivak’s own translation strategy necessitates the translator’s intimate understanding of the language and situation of the original. It draws on poststructuralist concepts of rhetoric, logic and the social.

Spivak’s work is indicative of how cultural studies, and especially postcolonialism, has over the past decade focused on issues of translation, the transnational and colonization. The linking of colonization and translation is accompanied by the argument that translation has played an active role in the colonization process and in disseminating an ideologically motivated image of colonized peoples. A parallel which feminist theorists have drawn between the conventional male-driven depiction of translations and of women, so has the metaphor been used of the colony as an imitative and inferior translational copy whose suppressed identity has been overwritten by the colonizer. Translation’s role in disseminating such ideological images has led Bassnett and Trivedi (1999: 5) to refer to the ‘shameful history of translation’.

The central intersection of translation studies and postcolonial theory is that of power relations. Tejaswini Niranjana’s *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context* presents an image of the post-colonial as ‘still scored through by an absentee colonialism’ (Niranjana 1992: 8). She sees literary translation as one of the discourses (the others being education, theology, historiography and philosophy) which ‘inform the hegemonic apparatuses that belong to the ideological structure of colonial rule’ (p. 33). Niranjana’s focus is on the way translation into English has generally been used by the colonial power to construct a rewritten image of the ‘East’ that has then come to stand for the truth. She gives other examples of the colonizer’s imposition of ideological values. These vary from missionaries who ran schools for the colonized and who also performed a role as linguists and translators, to ethnographers who recorded grammars of native languages. Niranjana sees all these groups as ‘participating in the enormous project of collection and codification on which colonial power was based’ (p. 34). She specifically attacks translation’s role within this power structure:

Translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism. (Niranjana 1992: 2)

Furthermore, she goes on to criticize translation studies itself for its largely western orientation and for three main failings that she sees resulting from this (pp. 48–9):

(1) that translation studies has until recently not considered the question of power imbalance between different languages

(2) that the concepts underlying much of Western translation theory are flawed (‘its notions of text, author, and meaning are based on an unproblematic, naively  
representational theory of language’)

(3) that the ‘humanistic enterprise’ of translation needs to be questioned, since translation in the colonial context builds a conceptual image of colonial domination into  
the discourse of western philosophy.

Niranjana writes from an avowedly poststructuralist perspective.  This overlapping is indicative of the interaction of different aspects of cultural studies and of the way in which they interface with translation studies. It also informs Niranjana’s recommendations for action, which are:

(1) in general, that the postcolonial translator must call into question every aspect of colonialism and liberal nationalism (p. 167). For Niranjana, this is not just a question of avoiding western metaphysical representations; it is a case of ‘dismantl[ing] the hegemonic West from within’, deconstructing and identifying the means by which the west represses the non-west and marginalizes its own otherness (p. 171). In this way such repression can then be countered.

(2) specifically, Niranjana calls for an ‘interventionist’ approach from the translator. ‘I initiate here a practice of translation that is speculative, provisional and interventionist’, she proclaims (p. 173) in her analysis of translations of a spiritual vacana poem from Southern India. She attacks existing translations (including one by the celebrated A. K. Ramanujan) as ‘attempting to assimilate S´aivite poetry to the discourses of Christianity or of a post-Romantic New Criticism’ (p. 180), analogous to nineteenth-century native responses to colonialism. Her own suggested translation resists the ‘containment’ of colonial discourse by, amongst other things, reinscribing the name of the poet’s god Guhe¯¯s´vara and the linga representation of light, and by avoiding similes that would tone down the native form of metaphorization (pp. 182–6).

Asymmetrical power relationships in a postcolonial context also form the thread of the important collection of essays entitled Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice, edited by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (1999). In their introduction (p. 13) they see these power relationships being played out in the unequal struggle of various local languages against ‘the one master-language of our postcolonial world, English’. Translation is thus seen as the battleground and exemplification of the postcolonial context; there is a close linkage of translational to transnational, the latter term referring both to those postcolonials living ‘between’ nations as emigrants (as in the example of Salman Rushdie, described in Bhabha 1994) and, more widely, as the ‘locational disrupture’ that describes the situation of those who remain in the melting pot of their native ‘site’:

In current theoretical discourse, then, to speak of postcolonial translation is little short of tautology. In our age of (the valorization of) migrancy, exile and diaspora, the word ‘translation’ seems to have come full circle and reverted from its figurative literary meaning of an interlingual transaction to its etymological physical meaning of locational disrupture; translation seems to have been translated back to its origins. (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 13)

Crucial, here, are the interrelated concepts of ‘in-betweenness’, ‘the third space’ and ‘hybridity’ and ‘cultural difference’, which postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha uses to theorize questions of identity, agency and belonging in *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1994). For Bhabha, the discourse of colonial power is sophisticated and often camouflaged but its authority may be subverted by the production of ambivalent cultural hybridity that allows enunciative space for the discourse of the colonized to interrelate with it and thus undermine it. The consequences for the translator are crucial. As Michaela Wolf (2000: 142) states, ‘The translator is no longer a mediator between two different poles, but her/his activities are inscribed in cultural overlappings which imply difference’. More recent work on colonial difference, by Sathya Rao (2006), challenges Bhabha’s view that postcolonial translation is subversive. Rao proposes the term ‘non-colonial translation theory’, which ‘considers the original as a radical immanence indifferent to the (colonial) world and therefore untranslatable into it’ (p. 89). This calls for a ‘radically foreign performance’ or non-translation.

The contributions contained in Bassnett and Trivedi’s book show that postcolonial translation studies take many forms. Several chapters are based on the theory and practice of translation from an Indian perspective: ‘Indian literary traditions are essentially traditions of translation’, says Devy (1999: 187), and studies are included of the work of renowned translators B. M. Srikantaiah (Viswanatha and Simon 1999) and A. K. Ramanujan (Dharwadker 1999). In the latter case, Dharwadker reacts against Niranjana’s attack on Ramanujan, stating that Ramanujan had worked from an earlier and different version of the poem, that Niranjana ignores the translator’s commentary on the poem, and that the goal of the translation was to orient the western reader to cross-cultural similarities.

Source: *Introducing Translation Studies*by Jeremy Munday. Routledge 2001