



The Politics of Translating Indian Regional Literature into English: Power Representation, and Cultural Hierarchies in Literary Translation

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Article information

Received: 14th April 2025

Received in revised form: 12th May 2025

Accepted: 16th June 2025

Available online: 7th July 2025

Volume: 1

Issue: 3

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17275512>

Abstract

This paper examines the complex political dynamics underlying the translation of Indian regional literature into English, analyzing how power structures, cultural hierarchies, and market forces shape both the selection and representation of regional texts in the global literary marketplace. Through a theoretical framework drawing from postcolonial translation studies and cultural sociology, this analysis reveals how English translations of Indian regional literature navigate tensions between cultural authenticity and commercial viability, often reinforcing existing linguistic hierarchies while simultaneously providing global visibility for marginalized voices. The study demonstrates that translation politics in this context involve multiple stakeholders—publishers, translators, critics, and readers—whose competing interests shape which stories are told and how they are represented to English-speaking audiences. The implications extend beyond literary studies to broader questions of cultural representation, linguistic diversity, and postcolonial power dynamics in the contemporary global literary ecosystem.

Keywords:- Translation studies, Postcolonial literature, Indian regional literature, Cultural representation, Linguistic hierarchy, Literary translation politics

Introduction

The translation of Indian regional literature into English represents one of the most politically charged domains of contemporary literary practice, intersecting questions of linguistic hierarchy, cultural representation, and postcolonial power dynamics. India's linguistic diversity, encompassing twenty-two officially recognized languages and hundreds of regional dialects, creates a complex terrain where translation becomes not merely a technical exercise but a profoundly political act that determines which voices gain global recognition and which remain marginalized. The dominance of English as both the colonial legacy and the contemporary lingua franca of international literary circulation positions English translations as gatekeepers to global literary recognition, making the politics of translation particularly acute in the Indian context.

This paper argues that the translation of Indian regional literature into English is shaped by interlocking systems of power that privilege certain narratives, languages, and cultural representations while marginalizing others. The central research question guiding this analysis is: How do power structures, cultural hierarchies, and market forces shape the translation of Indian regional literature into English, and what are the implications for literary representation and cultural authenticity? This inquiry necessitates examining not only the texts themselves but the entire ecosystem of literary production, from selection and translation processes to publication, marketing, and reception in global literary markets.

The significance of this investigation extends beyond academic literary studies to broader questions of cultural justice, linguistic diversity, and the decolonization of literary canons. As Indian regional literature gains increasing international attention through translations, understanding the political dynamics that govern this process becomes crucial for recognizing both the opportunities and limitations of translation as a tool for cultural representation and literary democratization.

Theoretical Grounding

The theoretical framework for analyzing the politics of translation draws primarily from postcolonial translation studies, cultural sociology, and theories of linguistic imperialism. Lawrence Venuti's concept of translation as an inherently political practice that involves "domestication" versus "foreignization" strategies provides a foundational understanding of how translators navigate between source and target cultures. Venuti's argument that translation is "always ideological" because it involves "the reconstruction of a foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that pre-exist it in the target language" establishes the political stakes of every translation decision.

Postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha offer crucial insights into the power dynamics of translation in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Spivak's notion of the translator's "ethical responsibility" and her critique of translation as potential "epistemic violence" illuminate how translation can either amplify or silence subaltern voices. Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" and "hybridity" provides a framework for understanding how translated texts exist in liminal spaces between cultures, potentially challenging or reinforcing colonial hierarchies.

Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and symbolic violence are particularly relevant for understanding the literary field's power structures. Bourdieu's analysis of how cultural products gain legitimacy through institutional recognition helps explain the mechanisms by which certain translated works achieve canonical status while others remain marginalized. His concept of "symbolic domination" illuminates how linguistic hierarchies operate in ways that appear natural rather than politically constructed.

Contemporary scholars of Indian literature and translation studies, including Harish Trivedi, Mini Chandran, and Ranjit Hoskote, have specifically examined the politics of translating Indian languages. Their work reveals how translation practices in India are shaped by historical colonial relationships, contemporary publishing economics, and ongoing debates about linguistic authenticity and cultural representation.

Analysis

Historical Context and Colonial Legacy

The politics of translating Indian regional literature into English cannot be understood without examining the historical context of colonialism and its lasting impact on linguistic hierarchies. British colonial education policies deliberately privileged English over Indian languages, creating what Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls the "colonisation of the mind." This

historical legacy continues to influence contemporary translation practices, where English serves as the presumed universal language of literary communication.

The colonial period established English as the language of power, administration, and educated discourse, creating what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan terms a "hierarchical multilingualism" where English occupies the apex of linguistic prestige. This hierarchy profoundly affects which regional texts are considered worthy of translation and how they are presented to English-speaking audiences. The presumption that texts must be translated into English to achieve literary significance perpetuates colonial-era assumptions about linguistic value and cultural legitimacy.

Selection Mechanisms and Publishing Politics

The process of selecting which regional texts receive English translation reveals the operation of multiple filtering mechanisms that reflect both market considerations and cultural biases. Publishing houses, particularly those with international reach, play a crucial gatekeeping role in determining which regional literatures gain global visibility. Economic considerations often prioritize texts that conform to Western readers' expectations of "authentic" Indian experience, potentially leading to the selection of works that emphasize exoticism, tradition, or social problems over more complex or experimental regional literature.

The concept of "publishability" in the international market creates what Sarah Brouillette calls a "postcolonial exotic" where regional literature is valued primarily for its difference from Western literary traditions rather than its intrinsic artistic merit. This dynamic can result in the translation of texts that confirm rather than challenge Western assumptions about Indian culture, society, and literary expression.

Translator Positionality and Cultural Mediation

The identity and cultural positioning of translators significantly influence how regional literature is rendered in English. Translators occupy a complex position as cultural mediators who must navigate between source and target audiences while making numerous decisions about cultural representation, linguistic register, and explanatory context. The choice between insider and outsider translators—those from the source culture versus those from the target culture—carries different political implications for representation and authenticity.

Indian translators working with their own regional languages bring intimate cultural knowledge but may face pressure to "explain" their cultures to English-speaking audiences in ways that can perpetuate stereotypes or oversimplifications. Non-Indian translators may offer fresh perspectives but risk cultural misrepresentation or appropriation. The increasing recognition of translation as a creative rather than merely technical practice has led to greater acknowledgment of translators' cultural and political agency in shaping literary reception.

Language Ideologies and Cultural Representation

The translation process inevitably involves decisions about how to represent regional cultural practices, social relations, and worldviews for English-speaking audiences. These decisions reflect underlying language ideologies—beliefs about the relationship between language and culture, the translatability of cultural concepts, and the responsibility of translation to preserve or adapt cultural specificity.

The retention of regional terms, cultural practices, and linguistic structures in translation can serve as a form of resistance to cultural homogenization, but it can also create barriers to reader comprehension and commercial success. Conversely, extensive adaptation and explanation can make texts more accessible but potentially diminish their cultural specificity and complexity. These translation strategies reflect broader tensions between cultural preservation and global circulation, authenticity and accessibility.

Interpretation

Power Dynamics and Literary Circulation

The politics of translating Indian regional literature into English reveals the operation of what Pascale Casanova calls the "world republic of letters"—a global literary space characterized by unequal power relations between languages and literary traditions. English functions as the dominant "central" language that provides access to global literary circulation, while regional Indian languages are positioned as "peripheral" languages that require translation to achieve international recognition.

This dynamic creates what might be termed "translation dependency," where the literary value and global significance of regional works become contingent upon their availability in English translation. Such dependency can paradoxically both celebrate and marginalize regional literature—providing international platforms while simultaneously suggesting the inadequacy of regional languages for global communication.

Authenticity, Agency, and Cultural Authority

The translation of regional literature raises complex questions about cultural authenticity and who possesses the authority to represent regional cultures to global audiences. The emphasis on "authentic" cultural representation in international literary markets can create pressure for translated works to perform cultural identity in specific ways, potentially limiting the diversity and complexity of regional literary expression.

Furthermore, the success of translated regional literature in international markets can influence literary production in regional languages, creating feedback loops where regional writers begin to consider potential English translation and global reception in their creative processes. This influence represents a form of what might be called "anticipatory translation," where the possibility of translation shapes original literary creation.

Market Forces and Cultural Commodification

The commercial imperatives of international publishing significantly influence which regional texts are translated and how they are marketed to English-speaking audiences. The need for commercial viability can lead to the privileging of texts that conform to existing market categories and reader expectations, potentially limiting the diversity of regional literature available in translation.

The packaging and marketing of translated regional literature often emphasizes exotic or distinctive cultural elements, creating what Graham Huggan calls "the postcolonial exotic"—a marketing strategy that commodifies cultural difference for consumption by international audiences. This commodification process can simultaneously increase global awareness of regional literature while reducing its complexity to marketable cultural stereotypes.

Implications

Literary Canon Formation and Cultural Representation

The politics of translation significantly influence the formation of literary canons and the representation of Indian culture in global literary discourse. The texts that receive English translation and international recognition become representative of Indian regional literature more broadly, shaping global understanding of Indian literary traditions, cultural practices, and social realities.

This representational power carries significant responsibility, as translated works often serve as primary sources of cultural knowledge for international readers. The selection and

presentation of regional literature in translation can either challenge or reinforce cultural stereotypes, contribute to cross-cultural understanding or perpetuate misrepresentation.

Linguistic Diversity and Cultural Preservation

The emphasis on English translation as a pathway to literary recognition raises questions about the preservation and vitality of regional languages and literary traditions. While translation can increase global awareness of regional literature, the prioritization of English-language circulation may inadvertently contribute to the marginalization of regional languages and the devaluation of non-translated literary production.

The challenge lies in developing translation practices that celebrate linguistic diversity while providing global access to regional literature. This requires recognizing translation as one among many forms of literary circulation rather than the ultimate measure of literary value or cultural significance.

Decolonizing Translation Practices

The analysis of translation politics suggests the need for more conscious efforts to decolonize translation practices and challenge existing linguistic hierarchies. This might involve supporting translation between regional languages rather than exclusively into English, recognizing the cultural and creative contributions of translators, and developing more nuanced approaches to cultural representation that avoid both exoticism and assimilation.

Decolonizing translation also requires acknowledging the political dimensions of translation decisions and working to ensure that translation practices serve the interests of regional literary communities rather than merely satisfying international market demands or academic curiosity.

Conclusion

The politics of translating Indian regional literature into English reveals the complex intersection of historical legacy, cultural representation, and contemporary market forces in shaping literary circulation and cultural understanding. This analysis demonstrates that translation is never a neutral or purely technical process but rather a profoundly political practice that both reflects and reproduces existing power relations while simultaneously creating possibilities for cultural exchange and literary recognition.

The examination of selection mechanisms, translator positionality, and market dynamics reveals how multiple stakeholders and interests shape which regional voices gain global recognition and how they are represented to English-speaking audiences. The tension between cultural authenticity and commercial viability, between preservation and accessibility, characterizes the challenges facing translators, publishers, and readers engaged with regional literature in translation.

The implications of these translation politics extend beyond literary studies to broader questions of cultural justice, linguistic diversity, and postcolonial power relations. As international interest in Indian regional literature continues to grow, understanding and addressing the political dimensions of translation becomes increasingly important for ensuring that translation practices serve cultural understanding rather than cultural commodification.

Future research might productively examine specific case studies of translation projects, the reception of translated regional literature in different international contexts, and the development of alternative models for literary circulation that challenge existing linguistic hierarchies. The goal should be to develop translation practices that honor the complexity and diversity of Indian regional literature while making it accessible to global audiences in ways that respect both source and target cultures.

This investigation ultimately suggests that the politics of translation require ongoing critical attention and conscious intervention to ensure that translation serves as a tool for cultural understanding and literary appreciation rather than cultural appropriation or misrepresentation. The challenge lies in developing approaches to translation that are both politically conscious and literarily sensitive, capable of navigating the complex terrain of cultural representation in an increasingly interconnected but unequal global literary landscape.

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