

## Comparative/World Literature and the Problematic of Translation

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### Abstract

*My paper addresses the paradox of the marginalized position of translation despite serving as a theoretical fulcrum for comparative and world literature(s) since their birth. The scholars from comparative/world literature and translation studies have come up with very different and contradictory answers to the question of translation. While some valorize it as a creative or reading practice, others undermine it due to the linguistic complexities that challenge the fidelity of the translation with the source text. Despite differences, they agree on one point that literary history is written from national perspective and fails to account for the trajectory of a translated work in different cultures and times. The paper will use selected articles of Susan Bassnett from the discipline of Translation Studies as the theoretical framework to address the problematic of translation as well as to propose a literary history written from a translational perspective as a bridge to ford the rifts between comparative and world literature(s). The paper will use dialectical approach to study the problematic of translation starting with Apter's thesis of "Untranslatability" juxtaposing it with Walkowitz's anti-thesis of "Born-translated works" to finally postulate a synthesis of comparative and world literature(s) with translation studies.*

**Keywords:** Comparative literature, World literature, Translation, Literary theory, English Literature

The translators and translations usually receive from comparative/world literary scholars what ancient Greek poets received from Plato; a rebuke for mimesis of the world that itself is mimesis of the original. From Plato's perspective it should be inferior to the creative work for being many times removed from the original. Historically, translator's role vacillates between visibility and invisibility, significance and insignificance according the need of the time to translate the works as a result of cultural or imperial encounter or under the pressure of globalizing forces. In academia too, translation has played significant role in establishing and developing departments, in making them interdisciplinary, in interlingual and intralingual transfer and flow of theories and practices, in cultural diplomacy and exchange of knowledge.

Once it has performed its service, its role is over, and the credit in terms of recognition, prestige and prizes always goes to the original authors.

The position of the translator becomes all the more enigmatic because of different interpretations of their role and location in the literary space as a reader, collaborator, creator or writer who writes the source text for another time, another culture giving it a new life. This job description does not bring him to the center of creative process; s/he remains in the periphery like an intermediary or a go-between who despite an important role as an interpreter between political delegates remains historically invisible because what he utters are not his words and cannot be attributed to him. Despite bridging the linguistic gap between the reader and the source text, the translator carries the burden of the sin of widening the gap between the reader and the original text. Most repeated charges against translation highlight Apter's concern of "untranslatability" or what is lost in translation:

- 1) The work is not and cannot be the true copy of the original, as not everything can be translated.
- 2) The work is but a reading/interpretation of the original, which removed from its source language loses its cultural context.

The equation of Author — Text — Reader gets transformed into Author — Source Text — Translator — Translated Text — Reader. This intermediary position becomes a problematic because of the uneven demands of hierarchical world literary system that uses translator and translation as proletariats to meet the demands of production and circulation and yet denying them any share in the literary surplus.

The varied treatment of the concept of translation by Emily Apter and Rebecca Walkowitz presents the paradoxical situation in which translation serves as an obedient mistress to the comparative/world literature, and still is denied any legal rights in the unequal "world republic of letters" wedded to the myth of original text. This ambivalent treatment by different comparative and world literature scholars is the logical effect of the diverse interpretations of the concept of translation both as a theory and a practice. Added to this is the politics of translation that Apter and Walkowitz bring to light by presenting translation as a middleman of global literary market controlling circulation and production of the works without transforming the literary history to account for their transmission and exchange in different cultures and languages. Their analysis of the problematic of translation ignores, what Damrosch notes in his review of Apter's book, the main canons of translation studies (506-507). Taking selected articles of Susan Bassnett as theoretical framework, the paper critically studies the notions of "untranslatability" and "born-translated works" to propose translation both as theory and practice as a bridge to ford the rifts between comparative and world literature(s) in the modern global world.

The works that pose "untranslatability" and "born-translated works" challenge the practice of translation in the transnational and interdisciplinary fields of comparative and world literature(s). Translation is at the center of Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* to exchange and circulate the best of each nation. Translation has served to decenter the

monolingual world of national literature and to evolve world literature. In academia the world literature has enjoyed its popularity since 1990s, but Kathleen Shields argues that this accompanies decline of Goethe's valorization of translation; "translation is important for the creation of world literature but fades into the background once the ambition is achieved" (4). The objective of the paper is to discuss the problematic of translation by analyzing the selected texts of Emily Apter, Rebecca Walkowitz, and Susan Bassnett. The paper will use dialectical approach to study the problematic of translation starting with Apter's thesis of "Untranslatability" juxtaposing it with Walkowitz's anti-thesis of "Born-translated works" to finally postulate a synthesis of comparative and world literature(s) with translation studies.

Emily Apter's main argument targets the lack in the contemporary approaches to world literature because of their reliance on "translatability assumption" and their inability to accommodate "untranslatability" appropriately into "literary heuristic" (Apter 347). She postulates "untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature with bearing on approaches to world literatures" (ibid). It seems as if she is making an attempt to restore world literature to comparative literature's earlier resistance or even antagonism to translated works with an emphasis on the original text. The approach she proposes is not new, as the comparative literature has had always acknowledged the worth of "non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability" (ibid). Nicholas Harrison vehemently supports Apter's take on "untranslatability", which he interprets as the "loss" in translation, making a case for learning foreign languages as a pre-requisite to take world literature (411-412). Later, he acknowledges the limitation of his own argument that learning even a single foreign language requires a great investment of effort and time (421).

Apter puts the discipline of world literature in reverse gear, ironically, when the academia has already taken the translational turn. This non-translational turn raises many questions especially when she refutes her title and argument with a counter-claim that she is neither against world literature nor is she against translation or the possibility of translation. At the same time, she recognizes the interdisciplinary and transnational space shared by comparative/world literature (s) and translation studies. So, what is the contention? She maintains that world literature and translation studies should/could revise literary histories by redrafting "the map of geopolitics" that blindly follows "Euro-chronology" (ibid 349). Her demand is timely as we will later see by synthesizing her argument with that of Walkowitz, and Susan Bassnett urging for rewriting literary history, but what she overlooks in the process is the role of translation in the recent deprovincialization of Euro-centric disciplines of comparative/world literature(s) by including many non-European works as Walkowitz would argue (28). Translation still remains the only window<sup>1</sup> for the users of the major or global languages on the literatures in minor languages.

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<sup>1</sup> Damrosch definition of world literature includes one aspect as "windows on the world" (15). Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Apter's proposal to learn foreign languages is ideal but not practical. Lawrence Venuti argues; "World literature cannot be conceptualized apart from translation" (180). In the past (1960s and 1970s), when comparative literature department practiced this principle, it was limited to the holy trinity of "French-English-German" with Latin and Spanish on the outskirts (Dhaen qtd. in Braz 578). Albert Braz posits that minor literatures depend on translation to enter world literature. He gives examples of two Canadian writers Erin Moure and Stephen Henighan who hold that both core and peripheral literatures gain through translation (586). Only translation has the power to familiarize a work to peoples living beyond linguistic and geographic borders. Of course, Apter would not wish world literature to return to same Euro-centric space that it has struggled so long to deprovincialize, but the problem is that she is unwittingly falling in the same trap. She blames the politics of world literature and translation studies for the downsizing of national literature departments and foreign language instruction but overlooks the political underpinning of her own argument.

Apter's complaint is against the failure of literary studies to carry out anti-capitalist critique of "corporate privatization in arts" where translated literature is but "a model of deowned literature" and translation but "authorized plagiarism" (353). It is neither owned nor disowned but remains in a liminal space, and the translator "a natural complement" to world literature remains invisible (353). This concept can be read in complete contrast to that of Damrosch's idea of circulation where a text travels from its own culture to other cultures and thus gains in translation. Deowned literature on the contrary is the one that does neither belong to the host nor the guest culture. Venuti also recognizes the politics of the "localizing drive of translation" (Venuti 181) that gives in to the pressure of literary market in transforming the text for a new culture by losing the original cultural reference, but at the end what translation offers is a shared percentage of "loss or gain" (180).

Apter defines untranslatables differently in the course of her essay. For example, she points out the linguist barriers to translate glossolalia, homonymies and amphibolies etc. Later she makes them culturally and nationally specific references that cannot be translated thus implying the difficulty of cultural translation (354). Walkowitz analyzing Apter's notion of untranslatability associated with the "creative failures" compares it with Barbara Cassin's use of the term associated with "not translating still" (Walkowitz 261). Cassin's definition also shares Apter's translation dysphoria, for translation becomes an interminable process not to be accomplished. Walkowitz reveals the political underpinning of the untranslatability project by linking it to the pressure of global literary market in the United States "to halt the absorption of many literatures into a supersized English-language curriculum" (32). For Walkowitz, the untranslatables are the "particularist" works bound by a region to resist translation (33).

This by no means should suggest that Apter is not familiar with different practices in translation. She gives reference of David Bellos who considers everything even style to be translatable with the common-sense belief that a translation needs not "preserve all dimensions of the original" (qtd. in Apter 355). There is also an example of Badiou's "hyper

translation” of Plato’s *Republic* by using French slang and introducing a female character (355). Opposed to Badiou’s is Cassin’s practice of untranslatability in the *Vocabulaire* to highlight “the equivocal symptoms in language” that leads only to relativism with no decisive and original meaning. This example of translation as subjective truth (Badiou) versus linguistic relativism of untranslatability (Cassin) testifies that translation as a practice can take different forms; imitation, adaptation or recreation thus every time and with every mediator it becomes a new thing. Shields shares Apter’s dissatisfaction with world literature’s “promotion of identifying over differing” (Apter qtd. in Shields 7) but criticizes her overestimation of the ineffable to the “effable in translations” (7) that fails to maintain a balance in her treatment of translation. In contrast, Damrosch’s treatment of translation is more balanced because despite his argument for the “gain” in translation, he admits that “some works are not translatable without substantial loss” because they are too local/national to secure “an effective life as world literature” (288-289).

The solution Apter offers is to synthesize “linguistic pluralism inherent in translation” with the practice of Weltliteratur to take full account of “linguistic constraints and truth conditions” in the process (360). This incommensurability of “untranslatability” is the basic characteristic of translation/translatability as is evident in the phrase “linguistic pluralism inherent in translation” (ibid). The examples of Badiou and Cassin bring forth the plasticity of translation both as a theory and as a practice. Damrosch also acknowledges that a work in the process of getting translated undergoes transformation “by the host culture’s national tradition” (283). Proponents of translation like Sandra Bermann also postulates that everything cannot be transferred to target language and translation serves as a work in process “a work of ongoing imperfection” and goes as far as to say that a perfect translation, or true copy “would lose or gain nothing” (440).

In contrast to Apter’s thesis of “untranslatability” can be studied Walkowitz’s anti-thesis of “born-translated works”. The very first sentence of her introduction “there is nothing easier and nothing more contemporary than translation” (Walkowitz 1) sounds as an antonym to the difficulties of translation as propounded by Apter. If a human translator is confronted with the dilemma of “linguistic pluralism”, what can be said about the machine or google translator? Technology has made access to a literary work in the target language just one click away. The circulation and production of works has acquired an unprecedented speed and any reader or technology user can access the translation of any work. Susan Bassnett in her article agrees on the need of a new perspective on translation especially in comparative literature. This perspective should recognize the role of technology or non-human objects in the process so that field should not view research into literature and culture as separate from “research into translation and technology” (“Response by Bassnett” 110). These shifts are similar to the shifts that Victorian society witnessed as a result of printing press and photography (112). Can this technological mediation challenge or critique the global literary capitalism, the politics of publishers or translation affecting the circulation and production of the works is not answered by Walkowitz. Her emphasis is on the inevitability of the



translation process that cannot be stopped despite its difficulties and complexities. Technology has begun a new era of the works that are “born translated” following in the footsteps of the “born digital”.

Walkowitz brings translation from the periphery to the center of world literary system controlling the circulation and production of works and their position in world literature. Like Apter and Cassanova, she also recognizes the politics of translation. In her “Notes to Introduction”, she cites Cassanova to suggest translation as an “index of dominance”, a deciding factor in the ranking of world literature to an extent that decline in the translation of French literature indicates decline of French literature/nation (259-260). Translation becomes the medium and origin of born-translated works. She postulates that “Born-translated novels approach this system opportunistically” to get an entry into global market, prize-race and academic list (Walkowitz 5). Writers like Milan Kundra, Samuel Beckett, Ngugi waThiong and Bernardo Atxaga write in local languages and also in dominant languages thus accessing the global market through translation. Dominant languages like English and French are used as medium of translation. Also, many diasporic and post-colonial writers choose to write in these languages to access wider readership. This “pre-emptive” translation practice has been a common phenomenon of the past and the present literary world (Walkowitz 11). This re-establishes the hegemony of recent global language (English) as a medium of translation as Shields notes, “world languages, such as Arabic, Hindi, French, German, Chinese and Russian are all yielding to English in the hierarchy of translations” (Shields 5).

Kathleen Shields in her paper discussing the politics of translation argues that works that are born translated (written in English as second/third language or are translated in English) do not necessarily represent the national/local culture (5). Citing example of Senghor and Sembene Ousmane, she asserts that Senghor’s place in world literature does not make his work representative of local culture (5). She also quotes example of Tagore whose recognition at home started with Nobel Prize in 1913 for which he was considered because of his translation. Harald Hjarne, the president of the Nobel Committee, viewed his translations as an attempt to benefit from dominant English literature, simultaneously adding to it. This also fulfilled another purpose that “of the expansion of British civilization ever since the days of Queen Elizabeth” (Hjarne qtd. n Shields 4). Braz also notes that some of the most respected national writers do not enjoy international recognition because their works are not translated (578). This kind of non-translation also limits world literature.

Both Apter and Walkowitz highlight the lack in the literary history. Their demand to rewrite literary history from translational perspective, is more practical and manageable proposal as we will see in our discussion of Susan Bassnett that translation studies is also looking forward to it. Apter is right to highlight the Eurocentrism of literary history that uses “ready-made typologies” like classicism, realism etc to study world literature. She also argues that Western philosophy is a product of Greek philosophy and its history is history of translation and concludes, “The philosophization of world remains a fundamental problem demanding the rephilosophization of literary history through the history of translation” (350).

Walkowitz also postulates, “Translation is the engine rather than caboose of literary history” (Walkowitz 5). Translation’s central role as “spur, problem and opportunity” to solve the problem can be realized by a new literary history with the power to transform the anglophone literature through discovering the way dominant languages and literatures are indebted to other languages and literatures (5). Studying the relation of dominant languages and literatures with the minor ones from Walkowitz’s standpoint could be a good example of how translation may transform the imagination of “national communities” (28). Albert Braz in his paper asserts that literary history should accommodate a text’s journey “across both space and time” without limiting it to its literary nationality (577). This is possible only if translation is accepted as visible “sphere of practice and knowledge” (Bermann 438).

The proposed literary history decenters the traditional history’s dependence on geographical and linguistic boundaries by “rethinking foundational concepts from perspectives of literary histories beyond Europe” (Walkowitz 30). Its project like comparative/world literature and translation studies becomes transnational and interdisciplinary to answer the question “how the multilingualism of the book changes the national singularity of the work” (ibid 25) or “when and where translation happens, and, especially, on how and why it fails” (Apter 350). One approach that Venuti proposes is to combine the practice of close reading with distant reading of Moretti to evaluate the individual translations for “formal and semantic gains... (and) shifts between the source and the translated texts” (185).

Susan Bassnett postulates a more interdisciplinary approach with her conviction that breakdown in “the divisions between theory, practice and pedagogy” can benefit different fields by bringing researchers, teachers and translators to work in collaboration (“Response by Bassnett” 110). Historically speaking, translation has evolved from the point of emphasis on literal translation, cultural translation, to creative translation with an increased visibility/significance of the role of translator. The importance of translator’s role increased the value of studying translated works in both comparative and world literature(s) (ibid). Citing Doris Bachman Medick’s use of the term ‘translational turn’ to suggest that humanities has become translational, Bassnett argues that the most important solution to the problematic of translation is the dialogic relationship with disciplines like literary, linguistic and cultural studies (“Translation Studies at a Cross-Roads” 23). Sandra Bermann in her article situates comparative/world literature and translation studies in “and” zone (dialogic space) to realize the dream of a more translational and transnational Humanities (432).

Bassnett acknowledges that anti-translation prejudices date back to the birth of translation studies as a discipline in 1970s and still persist in academia. She expresses her concern over the discipline’s failure to challenge “orthodoxies” perpetuated by research in world literature, postcolonial and cultural studies (“Translation Studies at a Cross-Roads” 15). She mentions Emily Apter, Cesar Dominguez and David Damrosch, to name a few, as the writers engaging with translation from different perspectives though “not always very aware of translation studies publications” (ibid 20). Historically speaking translation’s role

though consistent part of comparative literature has been “the suppressed, and the unacknowledged” (Bermann 437). In the 1990s, comparative literature did open itself to translation but with a continuous stress on learning languages to access the original text. This gap needs to be filled between the disciplines that share transnational and translational space with their lists full of translated works. Bassnett stresses the need to bring translation studies in the center to respond to the anxieties of “monolingual literary theorists” (“Translation Studies at a Cross-Roads” 22) by sharing research in translation studies with other colleagues and by engaging in “interdisciplinary, collaborative projects” (ibid 24).

Bassnett requires other disciplines to accept the plasticity of translation making a room for variety of translations. She responds to the concern of comparative and world literature scholars for “cultural translation” by quoting Harish Tridevi who blames this notion for monolingualism that “ignores the realities of interlingual transfer processes” (ibid 21). Translations are creative writings or interpretations of the text but so are the new editions that also alter the original meaning (“Response by Bassnett” 112). Different forms of translation include and are not limited to readings by different readers in time and space, changes resulting from different editions, copies, reprints and commentaries (“Postcolonial Worlds and Translation” 31). Homer, Shakespeare, Sophocles etc can still be enjoyed when the demise of the original text is acknowledged. The need is to initiate “collaborative courses and programs in translation” (Bermann 442).

Translation’s plasticity as a theory and practice enables it to respond to the changing need of the related disciplines. It is ready to cope with the changes brought about technology. Translation studies and comparative/world literature have an ethical dimension too; their openness to the “other” (Bermann 443). They are in dialogue with other cultures. All that is needed is a new cultural history that would record the translational turn of twenty first century as a period of translation resulting from global struggle between print culture and media technology (“Response by Bassnett” 111). Bassnett shares Apter’s and Walkowitz’s demand in stressing the importance of rewriting literary history to account for the significant role played by translation in the development of different literatures (“Postcolonial Worlds and Translation” 25). This new history can accommodate born-translated works, the stories of untranslatability, mistranslations and non/translations, their journey in space and time, their rise and fall in importance, translation’s role in circulation and production.

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