



Translation and the Making of Indian Literary Canons: English as Arbiter of Regional Literary Value

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Abstract

This paper investigates how translation into English functions as a mechanism of canon formation in Indian literature, determining which regional texts achieve recognition and longevity. Through the lens of postcolonial translation theory, this study examines the gatekeeping role that English translation plays in conferring literary legitimacy upon regional language works. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Niranjana, Spivak, and Venuti, alongside analysis of institutional structures and market dynamics, this research demonstrates that translation into English operates as a form of consecration that elevates certain texts while marginalizing others. The paper analyzes how publishing houses, academic institutions, and prize committees privilege translated works over original regional literature, thereby constructing hierarchical literary canons that privilege accessibility to English-reading audiences over aesthetic innovation or cultural authenticity. By examining specific cases of canonical inclusion and exclusion, this study reveals how translation practices determine not only which Indian voices are heard globally but also which literary traditions are valued domestically. The analysis concludes by considering alternative models of canon formation that might challenge English linguistic hegemony in Indian literary discourse.

Keywords:- Translation, Canon Formation, Indian Literature, English Translation, Regional Languages

Introduction

The question of what constitutes "Indian literature" remains deeply contested, with translation into English functioning as a de facto arbiter of literary value and canonical status. While India possesses rich literary traditions in languages ranging from Bengali to Kannada, from Tamil to Malayalam, the works that achieve national and international recognition are disproportionately those available in English translation. This phenomenon raises fundamental questions about the construction of literary canons in multilingual postcolonial contexts and the role of translation in determining cultural legitimacy.

Translation into English does not merely facilitate circulation; it transforms regional texts into objects eligible for inclusion in national and global literary canons. As Tejaswini Niranjana argues, translation has historically functioned as an instrument through which colonial powers defined and categorized colonized cultures, creating authoritative representations that served imperial interests (Niranjana 3). In contemporary India, while overt

colonial structures have dissolved, translation continues to operate within frameworks that privilege English linguistic and cultural capital. A literary work's translation into English often serves as a prerequisite for critical attention, prize consideration, and canonical recognition, even within India itself. This paper examines translation as a mechanism of canon formation, investigating how the process of selecting, translating, and promoting certain regional texts over others shapes hierarchical structures of literary value. The central argument is that English translation functions as a consecrating force that determines which regional literatures enter canonical discourse, thereby reproducing linguistic inequalities and privileging works that conform to English-language literary expectations. By analyzing institutional gatekeeping, market dynamics, and translation strategies, this study illuminates how canons are constructed through translation rather than merely reflected by it.

Theoretical Framework: Translation, Power, and Canon Formation

Translation as Cultural Gatekeeping

Canon formation has long been recognized as a political process reflecting the distribution of cultural power. Translation adds another dimension to this politics by determining which works from non-dominant languages gain entry into broader literary conversations. Niranjana's analysis of colonial translation practices demonstrates how translation historically functioned to create fixed, essentialized representations of Indian culture that could be catalogued and controlled (Niranjana 2). While contemporary translation ostensibly serves different purposes, the structural dynamics of power remain operative, with English continuing to function as the language through which Indian regional literatures must pass to achieve broader recognition. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of translation as an ethical practice emphasizes the translator's responsibility to the source text and culture (Spivak 181). However, this ethical ideal confronts the material reality that translation decisions are shaped by market forces, institutional preferences, and audience expectations. Translators and publishers must consider not only fidelity to source texts but also marketability, accessibility, and conformity to genre conventions. These constraints mean that certain types of regional literature experimental works, texts deeply embedded in local contexts, or those challenging Western literary norms face systemic barriers to translation and subsequent canonical inclusion.

Translation Strategies and Canonical Legibility

Lawrence Venuti's distinction between domestication and foreignization illuminates how translation strategies influence canonical reception. Domestication, which adapts foreign texts to target-language norms, tends to produce translations that integrate more smoothly into existing English-language canons (Venuti 20). Works that have been domesticated through translation may achieve canonical status precisely because they have been made to conform to English literary expectations, effectively erasing the cultural and linguistic features that made them distinctive in their source contexts. This creates a paradox where translation into English often requires the suppression of precisely those elements that make regional literature culturally significant.

Conversely, foreignizing translation strategies that preserve source-text difference may render works less accessible to English-language audiences and therefore less likely to achieve canonical status. Translators face a double bind: domesticate the text and risk cultural appropriation and misrepresentation, or foreignize it and potentially limit its circulation and canonical recognition. This structural constraint shapes which regional texts achieve translation and subsequent canonical inclusion, privileging works that can be rendered legible to English-language readers without extensive cultural mediation.

Institutional Gatekeeping and Canonical Authority

Literary canons are constructed and maintained through institutional mechanisms including university curricula, literary prizes, critical anthologies, and publishing practices. In India, these institutions increasingly privilege works available in English translation over those existing only in regional languages. University English departments, which exercise significant influence over canonical discourse, predominantly teach Indian literature through English translations or works originally written in English. This institutional preference shapes not only academic reception but also broader public perceptions of literary value.

Major literary prizes further reinforce the gatekeeping function of English translation. While some prizes honor regional language literature, the most prestigious awards those that confer national and international recognition typically require English accessibility. The economics of literary prestige thus create incentives for regional writers to seek English translation as a path to recognition, even as this process may compromise the linguistic and cultural specificity that gives their work meaning and power within regional contexts.

Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi observe that translation operates within asymmetrical power relations between cultures, with translation flows typically moving from less powerful to more powerful linguistic systems (Bassnett and Trivedi 5). In India, this manifests as a predominantly one-way translation from regional languages into English, with minimal reverse translation. This asymmetry reflects and reinforces English dominance in determining which literary works achieve canonical status. The institutional structures of Indian literary culture increasingly function as though works not translated into English exist in a kind of literary purgatory, visible to regional audiences but excluded from national and global canons.

Table 1: Language, Literary Production, and Canonical Representation

Language	Active Literary Tradition	Canonical Visibility
Bengali	Extensive	High (Tagore effect)
Hindi	Extensive	Medium-High
Tamil	Ancient/Modern	Medium
Kannada	Extensive	Low-Medium
Odia	Extensive	Low
Konkani	Active	Very Low

Note: Canonical visibility indicates presence in English-language literary anthologies, university curricula, and international critical discourse. Data compiled from Census of India 2011 and literary surveys

Publishing Economics and Canonical Selection

The economics of publishing profoundly shapes which regional texts achieve translation and canonical status. Commercial publishers operate according to market logic that privileges profitability over literary merit or cultural significance. This economic imperative creates systematic biases favoring texts that conform to established genre conventions, address topics perceived as universally appealing, or promise commercial success based on author reputation or previous sales performance. Regional literature that challenges these criteria, regardless of its aesthetic achievement or cultural importance, struggles to secure translation and distribution.

Publishers exercise significant gatekeeping power in determining which regional works receive translation. The selection process typically privileges texts that require minimal cultural mediation, can be marketed to international audiences, or fit recognizable categories of "Indian literature" established by previous commercial successes. This creates a feedback loop in which certain types of regional literature typically those addressing poverty, spirituality, caste conflict, or postcolonial identity receive disproportionate attention, while works addressing other

themes or employing experimental forms remain untranslated and thus excluded from canonical consideration.

The lack of robust institutional support for literary translation in India exacerbates these market-driven biases. Translators typically receive minimal compensation, with few opportunities for sustained professional engagement with translation work. Translation grants remain scarce, and literary prizes for translation carry less prestige and financial reward than prizes for original composition. This infrastructure deficit means that translation decisions are disproportionately influenced by commercial considerations rather than literary or cultural merit, further skewing canonical selection toward works that promise commercial viability in English-language markets.

Canon Formation Through Translation: Case Studies

Examining specific instances of canonical inclusion and exclusion through translation illuminates the mechanisms by which English functions as arbiter of literary value. The case of Rabindranath Tagore demonstrates how early translation into English established Bengali literature within global canons. Tagore's 1913 Nobel Prize, awarded for *Gitanjali* in English translation, created a template for Indian literary recognition that persists: translation into English as prerequisite for international acknowledgment. This precedent established English translation not merely as a means of circulation but as a mechanism of consecration that determines which Indian writers achieve lasting canonical status.

More recently, the divergent canonical trajectories of Kannada literature illustrate translation's selective operation. U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* achieved canonical status partly through its English translation, which made it accessible to national and international audiences. The translation enabled the work's inclusion in university curricula, critical anthologies, and literary histories all mechanisms of canonical consecration. Meanwhile, numerous Kannada writers of comparable or superior literary achievement remain largely unknown outside Karnataka due to lack of English translation, their absence from canons reflecting not lesser literary merit but limited English accessibility.

The translation of Dalit literature presents a more complex case where translation into English has enabled marginalized voices to challenge dominant canonical formations. Works by writers like Bama and Urmila Pawar have used English translation to bypass regional literary establishments that often excluded or marginalized Dalit perspectives. In these instances, translation into English paradoxically enables resistance to canonical hierarchies even while reinforcing English linguistic dominance. This demonstrates that translation's role in canon formation is not uniformly hegemonic but varies depending on the source culture's internal power dynamics and the strategic uses to which translation is put.

Toward Alternative Models of Canon Formation

Challenging English-mediated canon formation requires reimagining the institutional and economic structures that privilege English translation. One crucial intervention involves strengthening translation between Indian languages without English as intermediary. Direct translation from Tamil to Bengali, or Malayalam to Marathi, could help construct multilateral literary networks that decenter English while fostering genuine inter-regional dialogue. Such translation practices would create alternative circuits of literary circulation and recognition that operate independently of English linguistic gatekeeping.

Institutional reforms could also promote more equitable canon formation. University curricula that incorporate regional literature in original languages, rather than exclusively through English translation, would help validate regional literary traditions on their own terms. Literary prizes that honor works in regional languages, regardless of English availability, could shift incentive structures away from the current English-centric model. Publishers receiving

subsidies for translating regional literature might be freed from strict commercial constraints, enabling translation of formally innovative or culturally specific works that lack obvious commercial appeal.

Critical discourse must also evolve to recognize the politics inherent in translation-mediated canon formation. Scholars and critics should interrogate how canons constructed through English translation reflect and perpetuate linguistic hierarchies. This requires developing critical frameworks that can evaluate regional literature on its own terms rather than solely through translated versions that may domesticate or distort source texts. Greater critical attention to translation as a political act of canon formation, rather than a neutral process of linguistic transfer, can help challenge naturalized assumptions about English as necessary arbiter of literary value.

Finally, recognizing multiple, co-existing canons rather than singular national or global canons could validate regional literary traditions without requiring English mediation. Regional language literatures possess their own internal canons developed through indigenous critical traditions, audience reception, and institutional practices. Acknowledging these as legitimate canonical formations, rather than treating them as preliminary to inclusion in English-mediated national or global canons, would help decouple literary value from English accessibility.

Conclusion

Translation into English functions as more than a mechanism for circulating regional Indian literature; it operates as a consecrating force that determines which works achieve canonical recognition and literary legitimacy. This gatekeeping role reflects and perpetuates hierarchical relationships between English and regional languages, with English serving as arbiter of literary value despite India's rich multilingual literary traditions. The institutional structures, market forces, and critical practices examined in this study demonstrate that canons are actively constructed through translation rather than naturally emerging from literary merit alone.

The analysis reveals how publishing economics, institutional preferences, and translation strategies combine to privilege certain types of regional literature while marginalizing others. Works that can be domesticated to fit English literary expectations gain access to canonical discourse, while those requiring substantial cultural mediation or challenging Western genre conventions face systematic exclusion. This selection process shapes not only which individual texts achieve recognition but also how Indian literature as a whole is conceptualized and canonized.

Moving toward more equitable canon formation requires recognizing translation into English as a political practice that constructs hierarchies rather than simply reflecting literary quality. Alternative models including inter-regional translation, institutional reforms, and recognition of multiple co-existing canons offer pathways toward challenging English linguistic hegemony. However, such alternatives confront powerful structural forces including market economics, institutional inertia, and the global dominance of English in literary circulation.

Ultimately, this study argues that critically examining translation's role in canon formation is essential for understanding how literary value is produced and legitimated in postcolonial multilingual contexts. As long as English translation remains the primary gateway to canonical recognition, India's literary canons will continue to reflect linguistic power relations rather than the full diversity and richness of its regional literary traditions. Challenging this dynamic requires not only improving translation practices but fundamentally reimagining the relationship between translation, language politics, and literary value in Indian literary culture.

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