
Comparative Book Review: Disciplinary Succession or Mutual Correction? Translation, Comparison, and Power in Susan Bassnett's *Comparative Literature and Translation Studies*

Irbab Younis Hakim

M.Phil. in English Literature, University of Lahore, Lahore, Master of Arts in Religion (MAR), Lahore College of Theology, Lahore, Pakistan.

arbabyh@gmail.com

Abstract

This review reassesses Susan Bassnett's account of the relationship between comparative literature and translation studies by reading *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993) alongside *Translation Studies* (2002) and her later works. It argues that Bassnett's proposed disciplinary succession is better understood as productive self-revision. *Translation Studies* (2002) demonstrates the institutional, ideological, and textual strategies involved in cultural transfer and historicisms and evaluates the categories that translation is instrumental in asserting. The article investigates postcolonial power, translator agency, global news, and conceptual expansion, and argues that mutual accountability, rather than disciplinary hierarchy, is the most solid basis for present intercultural studies.

Keywords: Susan Bassnett, Comparative Literature, Translation Studies, Disciplinary Succession, Cultural Mediation, Postcolonial Translation, Translator agency, mutual accountability.

Introduction

Susan Bassnett's works, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993) and *Translation Studies* (2002), seem to depict a straightforward disciplinary shift: translation studies gain independence, and comparative literature's Western crisis results in a lesser role. Yet, when considering Bassnett's later anthology, the timeline reveals a pattern of constructive self-revision rather than simple replacement. *Constructing Cultures* (1998)

questions translation's expanding scope; *Post-colonial Translation* (1999) highlights power imbalances in transfer; *The Translator as Writer* (2006) redefines mediation as a form of authorship; *Translation in Global News* (2009) places translation within institutional settings; *Reflections on Translation* (2011) reasserts comparison as a critical tool; and *Translation* (2014) extends translation beyond interlingual literary exchange. This body of work supports Bassnett's call for comparison to reveal its mediating processes but challenges her assertion that translation studies should become the main partner of *comparative literature*. Both books, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993) and *Translation Studies* (2002), are better understood not as a manifesto of disciplinary succession but as mutually enriching critiques: comparison needs translation to uncover how cultural interactions are constructed, while translation depends on comparison to avoid becoming entirely universal or unbounded.

A Crisis of Authority, Not Of Comparison

The key insight in *Comparative Literature* (1993) shifts the focus from methodological issues to institutional ones. Bassnett broadly describes the discipline as a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary exploration of connections across history and geography (p. 1). However, her historical analysis shows how institutions have repeatedly confined that openness. In the 19th century, comparatists envisioned mutual exchange but also ranked European civilization above colonized cultures, so horizontal comparison coexisted with imperial hierarchy (17–21). The post-World War II American response against positivist influence expanded the canon but often regarded literary works as autonomous masterpieces, overlooking political factors that made some texts dynamic and others invisible (pp. 31–37). Based on Bassnett's evidence, comparison is not inherently limited; it only becomes problematic when its universalist stance is disguised.

The uneven global development of the alleged crisis intensifies this concern. While confidence in disciplinary methods waned in Western departments, work in India, China, and other regions grew by focusing on multilingual and local cultural contexts instead of a generic canon (pp. 5–9). A field might seem dead at its European or American centers while scholars elsewhere are actively redefining it. Labeling *comparative literature* as dead signals the collapse of a single Euro-American paradigm, but claiming the discipline is entirely

outdated repeats the metropolitan privilege that Bassnett challenges. Her critique suggests institutional reform rather than abandoning the methodology altogether.

Indeed, the book's most persuasive chapters practice the comparison its conclusion would subordinate. The account of the British Isles links the authority of English to linguistic suppression and imperial expansion, exposing English literature as a political construction rather than a neutral container (pp. 56–61). The analyses of maps, travel writing, and translation show that cultural mediators occupy interested positions rather than transparent vantage points (pp. 92–99, 114). The genealogy of Guinevere demonstrates that thematic study becomes rigorous when recurrence is interpreted through gender, institutional history, and shifting horizons of expectation, rather than cataloged as resemblance (pp. 115–137). These chapters do not survive despite comparison; they succeed because comparison has been historicized. The book's obituary is thus performatively refuted by its critical practice.

Bassnett's later work makes that contradiction harder to dismiss as a transitional inconsistency. Bassnett and Lefevere's *Constructing Cultures* (1998) asks where translation studies have arrived, while warning that the label can expand to encompass virtually anything connected with translation; its treatment of authority and the unstable distinction between original and translation turns disciplinary borders into questions rather than settled jurisdictions (pp. 1–11, 25–40). *Reflections on Translation* (2011) goes further: its defense of comparing multiple translations argues that a new version responds not only to a source but also to preceding translations, so historical change becomes visible through comparison (pp. 126–129). On this later evidence, comparison is not translation studies' subordinate neighbor but one of its indispensable methods. What migrates across disciplinary labels is therefore an intellectual practice, not a transferable property right.

The remaining weakness is scalar. Bassnett sometimes opposes a crisis-ridden West to intellectually regenerative non-Western locations, a reversal that provincializes Europe but risks compressing the internally diverse Indian, African, East Asian, and Latin American traditions into a collective remedy for a Western problem (Bassnett, 1993, pp. 5–9, 37–41). Bassnett and Trivedi's (1999) *Post-colonial Translation* substantially corrects that abstraction by situating translation within specific histories of colonial appropriation, vernacular resistance, and unequal cultural traffic (pp. 1–18). Yet the correction confirms the larger

point: the non-West cannot serve as a single counterweight to Europe, because power must be compared across particular languages, institutions, and agents. Decolonization here depends on more precise comparison, not on comparison's retirement.

Translation as Corrective, And As Overcorrection

Translation studies (2002), nevertheless, offer a necessary corrective to *comparative literature's* (1993) evasions. Poly-system theory displaces the hierarchy of original and derivative by asking when translations occupy central or peripheral positions, what a culture imports, who selects it, and how the receiving system rewrites its value (Bassnett, 1993, pp. 10–11, 141–145). The scarcity of translations into English thereby becomes not evidence of linguistic self-sufficiency but an index of imperial confidence and institutional selection (Bassnett, 1993, p. 143). Translation is neither a transparent window nor a secondary craft; it is a material practice through which canons, languages, and political identities are constructed.

This argument emphasizes that translation is vital for comparative studies, yet it doesn't diminish the importance of comparative literature. Bassnett's key reversal elevates translation studies by linking text and context and highlighting the ideological significance of intercultural exchange (Bassnett, 1993, pp. 159–161). Her later work, *Translation* (2014a), partly addresses the classification critique by defining translation broadly as interpretation and reformulation, including intralingual and inter-semiotic practices alongside language transfer (pp. 1–9). However, this inclusiveness introduces a new issue. If adaptation, rewriting, media shifts, migration, and cultural negotiation are all seen as translation, the field's explanatory scope expands, but at the risk of losing clear boundaries. The caution in *Constructing Cultures* (1998) against overgeneralizing translation studies applies even more to Bassnett's expanded definition (pp. 1–11). A concept should not dominate every related relation it helps elucidate.

Translation Studies (2002) offers a robust argument against inflation by framing mediation as a contestable process. Bassnett challenges the idea of a straightforward identity between source and target, viewing equivalence as a negotiated relationship influenced by linguistic, cultural, generic, and functional constraints (pp. 22–44). Her four-element framework—history, target-culture reception, linguistic transfer, and literary translation—

connects theory and practice without reducing the discipline to mere prescriptions (pp. 17–20). Consequently, analyses of poetry, prose, and drama depict translators as interpreters of structures who establish relevance hierarchies and anticipate audiences, rather than simply transferring invariant content across codes (pp. 82–86, 103–106, 114–135). In this context, translation becomes a clear critical issue rather than an all-encompassing metaphor.

Interpretation, however, does not confer ethical immunity. Although Bassnett rejects a single correct version, her discussions of *The Magic Mountain* and *Fontamara* still identify mistranslation, underinterpretation, and the loss of relations within the whole (pp. 114–123). Bassnett and Bush's (2006) *The Translator as Writer* makes the mediator's creativity more visible, but its relocation of translators from derivative technicians to writers and rewriters also increases, rather than cancels, their responsibility for consequential choices (pp. 1–8). Likewise, Bassnett and Trivedi's (1999) *Post-colonial Translation* shows why target-culture success cannot be an adequate norm: receiving institutions may reward precisely the simplifications and appropriations through which colonial power reproduces itself (pp. 1–18). A comparative close reading of these books yields a firmer standard than fidelity or function alone: a translation must justify both what its transformations accomplish and whose interests that accomplishment serves.

Translation Studies (2002) reveals why the ethical standard is unevenly applied through its internal layers. While its new preface addresses globalization, postcolonial critique, feminist intervention, translator visibility, and the breakdown of the traditional linguistic-versus-cultural divide (pp. 1–10), the core focus remains on European history. Bassnett explicitly limits her analysis to Europe and the United States (p. 47). More concerning, she admits that her examples are only from Indo-European languages yet suggests that general principles could apply across different languages (p. 21). Comparative Literature urges readers to challenge this universalizing stance. Ideas from a limited archive can circulate, but their application must be considered as a hypothesis rather than an automatic disciplinary rule.

The later corpus addresses some of these limitations but does not eliminate them completely. *Translation Studies* (2002), third edition, admits it overlooked areas like machine translation, cinema, subtitling, interpreting, oral literature, and electronic media (pp. 136–

137). In response, *Translation Studies* (2014b), fourth edition, explicitly shifts focus to translation in the twenty-first century (p. 141). More significantly, Bielsa and Bassnett's (2009) *Translation in Global News* shows that news translation involves choices, editing, synthesis, and institutional rewriting rather than just linguistic substitution (pp. 1–3). Similarly, *Reflections on Translation* (2011) tests this idea by examining the politically sensitive mediation of reported speech (pp. 134–143). These works expand translation studies beyond high literary texts and individual translators toward networks of editors, agencies, technologies, and audiences. Their contribution is both empirical and thematic: power becomes observable in workflows, not just as cultural context.

The *Translation Studies* (2002) third edition's approach to European history isn't entirely self-contained methodologically. It traces a sequence from Roman theory to Bible translation, vernacular development, Romantic originality, and Victorian conservatism, convincingly demonstrating that fidelity is tied to specific social contexts (pp. 47–81). However, this argument relies on comparing languages, eras, authors, and institutions. Although translation studies may operate independently administratively, its historical explanations still rely on the comparative method it claims to supplant. Furthermore, once it establishes that translation ideas are historically rooted, it must also apply the same scrutiny to concepts like equivalence, function, and system, especially when these terms are used outside their original traditions.

Mutual Accountability Instead Of Succession

Throughout Bassnett's work, disciplinary boundaries shift towards mutual reliance. *Comparative Literature* (1993) provides the institutional origins that show translation as more than a simple exchange between equal systems; *Translation Studies* (2002, 2014b) offers the analytical vocabulary to make cultural links textually disputable. *Post-colonial Translation* (1999) politicizes this vocabulary (Bassnett & Trivedi, pp. 1-18), *The Translator as Writer* (2006) assigns agency to it (Bassnett & Bush, pp. 1-8), and *Translation in Global News* (2009) situates it within institutions (Bielsa & Bassnett, pp. 1–3). However, *Reflections on Translation* (2011) affirms that each development remains understandable through comparison (pp. 126–129).

The appropriate relationship is neither annexation nor separation but mutual accountability. Comparison should reveal the translations and institutions that make their objects comparable; translation studies need to analyze the social contexts that grant authority to its categories. This upholds Bassnett's critique of mediation while avoiding using translation as an all-encompassing metaphor for every cultural change.

Conclusion

Compared to later works, *Translation Studies* (2002) provides a straightforward overview of translation issues, while the monograph on *Comparative Literature* (1993) urges skepticism towards the institutions that endorse such frameworks. Bassnett's career spans multiple disciplines, demonstrating that claiming exclusive ownership of intercultural studies can create blind spots that only alternative approaches reveal. As translation broadens to encompass comparison, rewriting, media transfer, migration, and institutional mediation, the key question becomes: when does its broad critique of power stop revealing hidden dynamics and begin to unintentionally reinforce the very disciplinary authority it seeks to challenge?

References

- Bassnett, S. (1993). *Comparative literature: A critical introduction*. Blackwell.
- Bassnett, S. (2002). *Translation studies* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Bassnett, S. (2011). *Reflections on translation*. Multilingual Matters.
- Bassnett, S. (2014a). *Translation*. Routledge.
- Bassnett, S. (2014b). *Translation studies* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Bassnett, S., & Bush, P. (Eds.). (2006). *The translator as writer*. Continuum.
- Bassnett, S., & Lefevere, A. (1998). *Constructing cultures: Essays on literary translation*. Multilingual Matters.
- Bassnett, S., & Trivedi, H. (Eds.). (1999). *Post-colonial translation: Theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Bielsa, E., & Bassnett, S. (2009). *Translation in global news*. Routledge.