

Original Article

Ethics of the Untranslatable: Translation as Epistemic Violence in Colonial and Postcolonial Texts

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Abstract

Translation has long been considered to be a bridging of cultures and languages, but its participation in the construction of knowledge, power, and representation has usually been underplayed, especially in colonial and postcolonial situations. The ethics of translation are explored in this paper with the contention that translation is simultaneously a site of epistemic violence and a site of potential resistance. In colonial contexts, translation strained to impose European forms of knowledge on indigenous epistemologies by reinterpreting, simplifying, or erasing culturally specific knowledge in order to render them comprehensible to the colonizers. Such processes silenced the subaltern voices as well as solidified hierarchical forms of knowledge, presenting Western understandings as authoritative and pushing local epistemologies to the periphery. On the other hand, postcolonial translators and writers employ the mechanisms of untranslatability, code-switching, and linguistic hybridity to reclaim epistemic agency, maintain cultural specificity, and counter the colonial language hegemony. Theoretical perspectives from the disciplines of translation studies, ethics, and postcolonial theory by Walter Benjamin, Lawrence Venuti, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Edward Said are employed in this essay to analyse the moral and epistemological engagement in cross-cultural translation. It places the struggle between fidelity, accessibility, and justice in the foreground, demonstrating that translation is always a politic of knowledge intervention rather than a neutral task. Prioritizing untranslatable terms and moral accountability, postcolonial translation practices expose the edges of colonial epistemologies and provide ways for epistemic justice. Finally, this research places translation as an extremely ethical exercise where linguistic mediation is accompanied by cultural conservation, historical memory, and the constant striving to decolonize knowledge creation.

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1. Introduction

Background: Translation in Cross-Cultural Encounters and Colonial Contexts

Translation has always been at the focal point of cross-cultural contact formation, as both a means of understanding and as an instrument of control. Throughout the ages, translation has facilitated the conveyance of ideas, religious scripture, literary pieces, and codes of law from language to culture, making carriers of dialogue, learning, and intellectual exchange. But translation is by no means a neutral activity; it is carried out under the terms of social, political, and historical power relations. In colonial contexts, translation was generally both the labour of enabling understanding and that of exercising jurisdiction over colonized cultures. By translating local texts into European languages, colonial officials, missionaries, and intellectuals made local knowledge intelligible in terms of Western epistemologies, typically disembodied texts from their religious, moral, or cultural particularity. This enabled colonial authorities to classify, explain, and master the intellectual and cultural output of colonized peoples. Even in the postcolonial era, translation remains a normative practice in the sense that decisions regarding language necessarily involve inclusion, exclusion, and meaning control. Translation work thus displays an inescapable tension between communication and domination: while it can create a space for intercultural communication, it can also reproduce power, erase difference, and reproduce epistemic hierarchies. Translation in this twofold light is needed, as it puts the representation, interpretation, and moral stakes centre stage, locating linguistic mediation in the place

of necessary confrontation where knowledge, culture, and power converge, and where past injustices can be reiterated or subverted.

B. Problem Statement

The colonial acts of translation most commonly worked as modes of epistemic violence, repeatedly imposing European epistemologies on indigenous systems of knowledge. By translating source cultures' texts, oral histories, and scripture or law into the language of the colonizer, these tendencies suppressed the epistemic superiority of the source culture and rearticulated indigenous ideas in terms more relevant to European readers but distorting or obliterating the initial meaning. This imposition traded cultural specificity to the extent that it reaffirmed epistemological hierarchies by situating Western knowledge as universal and authoritative and locating local knowledge in secondary or exoticized position. Colonial translation, not to mention mistranslation issues, entailed intentional censorship, misrepresentation, and standardization, subordinating native knowledge to colonial administrative, religious, or legal ends as often as possible. Sacred texts, myth, and native annals were repeatedly oversimplified, reinterpreted, or otherwise reworked to suit colonial requirements, distilling complex cultural ideas into comprehensible forms that in some inherent senses were altered. The implications of such practices were extensive, far reaching beyond the manner in which colonized societies represented themselves to extend to the manner in which their knowledge was documented, learned, and transmitted across the world. These tendencies illustrate that translation is more than linguistic exchange; it is a space where epistemology, power, and ideology are entangled. Such a discussion of this issue sheds light on the ethical issues relating to translation and shows how it might also be a tool of epistemic violence but provide potential means of postcolonial intervention, critique, and return of cultural agency.

C. Thesis Statement

This essay contends that translation in colonial and postcolonial contexts operates at the same time as an instrument of epistemic violence and as a place where ethical and cultural resistance is possible. While colonial translation practices once operated to enforce hierarchies, silence indigenous people, and subordinate indigenous epistemologies to Western structures, postcolonial literature and translation projects attempt to reclaim power, preserve cultural specificity, and disrupt dominant linguistic and epistemic norms. Translation is thus not just a technical or linguistic operation; it is an intensely political and ethical practice, tasked with responsibility. Analysing the conflict between fidelity, power, and representation, this research places centre stage how translation operates on authority, produces meaning, and produces cultural remembrance. Postcolonial writers and translators use tactics of untranslatability, code-switching, and saving culture-bound terms to challenge erasure and put in relief the distinctive epistemologies of their people. In doing so, it makes translation at the same time a prism through which one sees past and present forms of cultural domination and a vehicle whereby subaltern voices are empowered. The thesis puts at the forefront the ethical dimension intrinsic to translation, asserting that every linguistic act of mediation can reinscribe violence or perform justice, and that untranslatability is indeed an active and morally committed intervention in the politics of language, knowledge, and culture.

2. Theoretical Framework

A. Translation Studies and Ethics

(a) Walter Benjamin: The Task of the Translator

In his classic essay *The Task of the Translator*, Walter Benjamin redefines translation less as literal reproduction from one language into another than as a philosophical and ethical task. Translation, Benjamin proposes, can actually render the "afterlife" of a text, its underlying significance, and make it sound in a new linguistic environment. He contends that translation seeks to uncover the latent spiritual and intellectual meaning of the original rather than duplicating grammatical or semantic similarity. In this view, the moral function of the translator assumes dominance because he will be required to resolve the aesthetic and dialectic tensions between fidelity to the original and the aesthetic demands of making it coherent in a different language. In colonial settings, Benjamin's remark points out the moral implications of translation: if texts are denuded of cultural or epistemic richness, translation is being used as a tool for colonization instead of communication. Moral translation therefore must be responsive to the source culture's epistemology and understanding that words bear historical, social, and conceptual resonance. Postcolonial

interventions adopt this ethical approach to retrieve untranslatable significations and resist the reductionism of colonial translation activities.

(b) Lawrence Venuti: Invisibility and Domestication

Lawrence Venuti condemns the predominance of "domestication" approaches to translation, which render foreign texts fluent and accessible to target readers, usually at the cost of the otherness of the source culture. It is the visibility of the translator that matters, as Venuti argues: ethical translation should recognize the foreignness of the text and refuse to assimilate it into hegemonic linguistic and cultural norms. This model is particularly highly applicable in postcolonial scholarship, where translation has been used as epistemic violence throughout history. By prioritizing readability over cultural fidelity, colonial translators incoherently—or deliberately—excised indigenous worldviews, values, and epistemologies from the text. Venuti's emphasis on "foreignization" resonates with postcolonial strategies that foreground linguistic difference and resist the homogenizing pressures of colonial languages. Ethical translation, in this sense, becomes an intervention in cultural power structures, preserving the integrity and epistemic authority of marginalized voices.

(c) Gayatri Spivak: Subaltern Voices and Translational Ethics

Gayatri Spivak continues this debate by highlighting the translator's moral obligation to the subaltern, those whose voices are structurally silenced or marginalized. She argues that translation is not a technical procedure but an ethical one, in which interpretive decision-making has consequences for representation, visibility, and justice. Spivak calls the danger of misrepresentation and warns translators that conceptual master frames' imposition can reinforce epistemic violence, even by accident. Her work promotes a critical translation ethics practice being attentive to context, power, and the incommensurability of certain cultural meanings. In postcolonial writing, this moral issue dictates the appropriate management of native information and demands the moral imperative of countering erasure and misappropriation.

B. Postcolonial Theory and Language

(a) Homi Bhabha: Hybridity and the Third Space

Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory of hybridity and the "third space" may provide a model for postcolonial translation. Colonized language is not merely a means of communication but a third space of negotiation of the epistemologies of colonizer and indigene. Translation here is then a site of negotiation between cultures where hybrid meanings are created that refuse single, authoritative readings. The "third space" enables the subversion of colonial power, under which linguistic and cultural syncretism can short-circuit the epistemic hierarchies established under colonial power. Postcolonial translators generally make use of this theoretical space in a bid to retain untranslatable elements, the indicator of tension between power and fidelity.

(b) Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Language as Cultural Resistance

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is adamant on the cultural and political implicate of language choice. Writing in Gikuyu rather than English, he establishes the moral imperative of the maintenance of indigenous epistemologies and decolonization of language. Translation, in Ngũgĩ's scheme, cannot be separated from issues of power: the translation process of local knowledge into the language of the colonizers will reproduce historical injustices unless regulated critically. His emphasis on composition in local languages is a model of just ethical translation aiming for epistemic justice and cultural authenticity instead of accessibility at the transnational level, and exposes the ethical aspect of linguistic mediation in postcolonial situations.

(c) Edward Said: Language, Power, and Representation

Edward Said's own critique of Orientalism similarly illustrates how translation operates to mediate power and regulate representation. Colonial translations often imposed European conceptual schemes, presenting colonized cultures in registers of exoticism, inferiority, or moral deficiency. Said's book reminds us that translation is always political: it forms hierarchies of knowledge and exercises epistemic power. Postcolonial translation practice, then, needs to mediate these legacies, representing in a way that gives priority to marginal epistemologies and tries to undercut reductionist interpretation.

C. Epistemic Violence and Language

(a) Translation as Instrument of Erasure

Translation serves as an instrument of epistemic violence too when it habitually distorts or erases meaning from concepts and cultures. Indigenous concepts during colonial settings were habitually translated into forms understandable to European readers alone, replacing by implication the original epistemic frameworks. These processes not only bent meaning but also legitimized colonial rule through representations of local understanding as incomplete or lacking.

(b) Subversion through Untranslatability

Postcolonial writers and translators use the translatable/untranslatable binary, though, as a resistance strategy. Through the foregrounding of untranslatable vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and narrative forms, they maintain the epistemic specificity of indigenous knowledge. This not only subverts colonial orders, but also transforms translation into an ethically and politically engaged practice, alerting us to the ethical investment in language mediation.

(c) Translation, Ethics, and Knowledge Production

The postcolonial theory framework that includes translation studies demonstrates that translation is never a neutral activity. It transmits knowledge, builds cultural hierarchies, and bears monumental moral obligations. Translators, writers, and scholars have to manage these contradictions deftly, balancing between fidelity, readability, and justice and countering the epistemic violence inherent in past and ongoing processes of translation

3. Colonial Translation Practices

A. Impoverishment through Colonial Languages

The colonial powers imposed their languages—English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, among others—systematically as devices of government, education, and religion. It was not a benign imposition; it was an instrument to meld thought, knowledge production, and cultural identity to fit the world view of the colonizer. Local languages were usually relegated, debased, or pushed to the edges of unofficial spaces, while the colonial language was identified with power, civility, and intellectual legitimacy. Translation here was less a question of rendering colonized societies comprehensible through European reference frames than of making them intelligible within European frames of reference. Administrative handbooks, law codes, and scriptures, for example, were translated from European epistemologies, thus rebuilding native thought into extraneous categories. Such a practice put the local knowledge regimes, as translation would rob local terms of their cultural context, moral basis, or historical particularity, reinforcing colonial epistemes' hegemony.

B. Censorship, Misinterpretation, and Standardization

In addition to mere linguistic imposition, colonial translation was increasingly one of active censorship and deformation. Missionaries, anthropologists, and colonial administrators occasionally actively modified, oversimplified, or sanitized texts for ideologically or administratively expedient reasons. The native folklores, mythologies, and histories either were misinterpreted in the light of the European rationality or standardized to be adapted into the Western literary and juridical traditions. It not only altered the meaning of the original texts but also generated epistemic hierarchies that constructed European thought as rational, universal, and superior. For instance, sacred scriptures were translated in a manner that emphasized morality or rationality as understood in Europe, overwriting the spiritual, performative, or communal content found in the source culture. The overall effect was a disempowering of the epistemic power of the indigenous in general, such that the very process of translation became a tool of intellectual and cultural domination.

C. Case Examples

Missionary translations offer a good case in point. In colonial India, local language Bible translations had a tendency to incorporate decision-making interpretations that accommodated local religious practice and Christian doctrinal specification together with introducing novel syntactic form and local cosmology erasures. Similarly, in Africa, colonial state government translations of oral laws into written English or French law codes imposed foreign rationales and lexicons misrepresenting mores of communities. Even ostensibly neutral ethnographic translations

tended to recontextualize indigenous knowledge in language that amplified colonial power, illustrating that translation was not merely a coerced process but an energetic power of epistemic domination.

4. Postcolonial Reconfigurations of Translation

A. Resistance and Subversion

Postcolonial authors and translators have ever been working in translation as a location of resistance. In the recovery of linguistic space, they counter the epistemic hierarchies of colonial domination. Instead of surrendering to the discursive language or idiom, postcolonial writers usually mix native and colonial languages, use transliteration, or preserve locally characteristic words that cannot be translated. These actions upset the colonial assumption of homogenous understanding and compel readers to work with difference instead of internalizing it. By doing so, translation is political resistance, claiming self-determination of the originating culture and placing its epistemological authority centre stage. Therefore, for example, in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's fiction, Gikuyu rather than English is political, but also moral, recovering the language as a means of thinking and cultural preservation.

B. Untranslatability as Strategy

Untranslatability is not a failing but an a-conscious postcolonial tactic for preserving meanings over the colonial language. Through their highlighting of terms, idioms, or narrative forms that defy translation in the first place, authors maintain the epistemological richness and moral aspects of native knowledge. These linguistic "holes" also remind readers that translation is not literal correspondence but bargaining the cultural and moral stakes present in language. These tactics also thwart the epistemic violence of colonial translation: they reveal how knowledge was stolen or skewed and demand that certain truths cannot ever be yanked out of their cultural and linguistic contexts. Salman Rushdie, for instance, regularly transplants Indian idioms and narrative structures into English-language literature and forces readers to encounter the built-in dissonance and fecundity of the source culture.

C. Literary Examples

Postcolonial literary heritage is full of instances of such strategies. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's appeal for writing in indigenous languages is the ethical reappropriation of linguistic territory, and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* disrupts English as a hegemonic literary style with code-switching and culture-specific idioms, which reveals the nuance of translation across colonial divides. Arundhati Roy, in *The God of Small Things*, employs Malayalam words and cultural allusions without necessarily translating fully, forcing readers to find and connect with the untranslatable in a manner that maintains the epistemic and ethical richness of the source culture. These literary strategies illustrate how postcolonial writers redefine translation not simply as linguistic mediation but as a cultural assertion apparatus, an instrument of epistemic justice, and a form of resistance to the remnant traces of colonial power.

5. Ethical Considerations

A. Fidelity vs. Power

Translation has been seen as a technical practice of fidelity—faithfully translating words and meanings from one language into another. But within postcolonial and colonial contexts, loyalty is never so naively; it is always caught within power relations. Translators are forced to negotiate the tension between keeping the semantic coherence of the source text intact and complying with the hegemonic tongues' expectations or epistemic schemata. Colonial translations privileged the legibility of European consumers over source fidelity to indigenous senses, thereby subjecting source epistemologies to the colonizer's linguistic and cultural shape. This is one sense in which translation is not just a matter of linguistic accuracy but is very much political: deciding what to translate, omit, or domesticate risks reproducing epistemic hierarchies. Postcolonial writers and translators are confronted with the same dilemma when translating to or writing in a hegemonic language. They are constantly forced to negotiate the ethics of representation, to question whether fidelity to meaning will demolish the readability or intelligibility of the text to wider publics. Here, fidelity is an ethical place of tension, revealing the truth that translation is never a neutral pipeline but a place where linguistic, cultural, and political forces meet, and upon which power imbalances are performed and negotiated through decisions that seem insubstantial but have apocalyptic epistemic ramifications.

Table 1: Ethical Tension Between Fidelity and Power in Colonial and Postcolonial Translation

Analytical Dimension	Colonial Translation Practices	Postcolonial Ethical Dilemma
Concept of Fidelity	Subordinated to colonial legibility	Contested between meaning and readability
Power Relations	European epistemologies prioritized	Hegemonic language dominance persists
Translation Strategy	Domestication and omission of indigenous meanings	Strategic resistance or partial accommodation
Epistemic Impact	Erasure and reshaping of source knowledge	Risk of epistemic distortion or opacity
Ethical Stakes	Translation as a tool of domination	Translation as a site of ethical negotiation
Political Consequence	Reinforcement of epistemic hierarchies	Possibility of disruption or inscription of power

Interpretive note: Fidelity functions not as a neutral technical criterion but as an ethical and political terrain, where translation choices enact or resist epistemic violence.

B. Translators’ Responsibility

The translator is committed to a queerly ethical place, bracketing representation and mediation. In translating works of colonized or oppressed societies, the translator is not just responsible for the translation of words but upholding the epistemic, historical, and cultural integrity of the original. This entails being sensitive to the limitations inherent in translation as well as to the possibility of perpetuating epistemic violence—through omission, misreading, or reduction. Translators will be faced with the following questions: What in the source is not negotiable? What cultural allusions can be appropriated without erasure? How does one translate untranslatable ideas without loss of their meaning? Postcolonial translators turn to facing these challenges in creative ways by using footnotes, glossaries, code-switching, or transliteration as a way of maintaining the ethical and epistemic aspects of the original writing. This is a demonstration of a duty toward ethical openness, a realization that translation is an interpretive act in which moral agency exists. In bringing the ethical concern of the translator to the fore, postcolonial theory emphasizes approaching linguistic mediation as an epistemically responsible, morally reflective, and culturally sensitive practice.

C. Epistemic Justice

At the heart of the moral foundations of translation is the principle of epistemic justice: recognizing and valuing diverse epistemologies of experience, being, and communicating. Colonial translation habits habitually transgressed into epistemic injustice through superimposing Western languages and cognitive structures onto indigenous systems of knowledge. Postcolonial translation critiques attempt to restore this justice, for it is realized that particular meanings, experiences, and cultural logics will not be translatable within the language of the colonizer. Untranslatability is no longer a restriction but refigured as a conscious protective measure against cultural specificity and epistemic erasure. Epistemic justice believers’ scholars and translators highlight the moral obligation to maintain such differences, not thinking of language as just a tool of communication but as a container that contains cultural memory, moral philosophy, and consciousness of history. Translation is therefore a moral act of restoration and acknowledgement, whereby the work of the translator is not to universalize or assimilate but to respect the integrity of the initial epistemology and convey its ethical and intellectual requirements to broader societies without erasure.

6. Conclusion

A. Synthesis of Findings

The present research illustrates that colonial and postcolonial translation is a double-edged force: it is both a space of epistemic violence and a vehicle for ethical engagement and decolonial reappropriation. Colonial translations habitually exercised linguistic hierarchies, annexed native knowledge, and effaced cultural specificity, recasting translation as an instrument of epistemic domination. In contrast, postcolonial writing and translation strategies redescribe this space, using untranslatability, hybridity, and linguistic creativity to reargue against erasure and establish epistemic self-determination. Writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy illustrate how translation—or strategic non-translation—can reassert agency, place in relief cultural specificity, and counter the normative authority of powerful languages. In fact, translation is neither a passive act of transmutation

but an ethical and political negotiation with the histories, cultures, and epistemologies it intermediaries. The conclusions emphasize that fidelity, readability, and representational power are never disentangled but always ethically entwined, necessitating critical thinking on the translators', scholars', and readers' parts.

B. Implications

The ethical stakes of translation have far-reaching implications for postcolonial scholarship and literary studies. Understanding translation as both a location of epistemic violence and a location of ethical responsibility requires a critical shift: researchers must not only ask about the linguistic accuracy of translations but also ask about the political, cultural, and moral implications of their decisions. Translation studies must thus bring in ethical frameworks that privilege epistemic justice, cultural integrity, and the moral obligation of mediating across languages and histories. For literary scholarship, this means that analysis of postcolonial writing needs to take into consideration both the content and the ethical politics of language, bearing in mind how untranslatable ideas, code-mixing, and narrative techniques work to counteract epistemic domination. In redescribing translation as an ethically loaded activity, research can transcend shallow understandings of equivalence, engaging at a deep level with issues of power, representation, and responsibility.

C. Future Directions

Future translation ethics studies need to investigate the widening terrain of untranslatability in international, digital, and cross-cultural environments. Digital humanities provide new grounds for maintaining linguistic variation and for simulating the ethical stakes of translation between cultures, enabling researchers to graph untranslatable ideas and trace epistemic divides. Comparative analyses of postcolonial literatures from continents can shed light on how various languages and cultural environments utilize untranslatability as resistance, giving us in-depth understanding of the ethics of translation. In addition, teaching methods can include analysis of untranslatable words and cross-cultural linguistic ethics, equipping students and translators to handle global literature responsibly. In the end, broadening the scope of untranslatability places a greater ethical burden on all translation work and positions it as a moral, epistemic, and cultural intervention and not a neutral technical operation. Such a move not only enriches scholarship but also participates in the acknowledgment, preservation, and celebration of multiplex worldviews and linguistic knowledge systems in a more globalized world.

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