

A REFLECTION ON THE ROLES OF A TRANSLATOR AS A CULTURAL MEDIATOR IN LITERARY TRANSLATION

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Abstract

Literary translation involves more than the transfer of words from one language to another; it requires the translator to function as a mediator between cultures. This study reflects on the various roles a translator plays as a cultural mediator in literary translation and examines how these roles influence the interpretation and reception of literary texts across cultural boundaries. The problem addressed in this study is that literary translation is often perceived primarily as a linguistic activity, which overlooks the complex cultural responsibilities translators undertake when conveying culturally embedded meanings. The objectives of the study are to identify and analyse the diverse roles translators perform in literary translation and to highlight the importance of cultural competence in the translation process. The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach, drawing on theoretical discussions in translation studies and illustrative examples from literary works to examine how translators interpret cultural references, negotiate meaning, and adapt stylistic features for target audiences. The findings reveal that translators perform multiple roles, including interpreters of cultural meaning, negotiators between source and target cultures, preservers of cultural identity, creative adapters of stylistic features, and ethical mediators responsible for representing cultures accurately. These roles demonstrate that literary translation is an interpretive and culturally sensitive practice rather than a purely mechanical process. The study concludes that recognizing translators as cultural mediators enhances our understanding of the intellectual and creative contributions they make to global literary exchange. It therefore recommends that translators develop strong cultural awareness, contextual knowledge, and ethical sensitivity in order to effectively mediate between cultures and preserve the richness of literary texts in translation.

Keywords

Literary Translation,

Cultural Mediation,

Translator's Role,

Cross-cultural Communication,

Translation Studies.

1. Introduction

Literary translation plays a crucial role in the circulation of literature across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Through translation, literary works move beyond their original geographical and linguistic contexts, allowing readers from different cultures to access stories, ideas, and experiences that might otherwise remain inaccessible. Unlike technical translation, literary translation involves not only transferring meaning but also recreating the aesthetic, stylistic, and cultural elements that shape a literary work. For this reason, it is widely regarded as a complex and creative activity that requires both linguistic competence and cultural sensitivity (Puzyrko, 2023; Wang, 2024).

The close relationship between language and culture makes translation particularly challenging. Language carries cultural values, beliefs, traditions, and social practices, and literary texts often contain culturally embedded elements such as idioms, proverbs, metaphors, and historical references. Translators must therefore navigate these cultural dimensions and find ways to convey them effectively in the target language so that readers from different cultural backgrounds can understand them (Issa, 2024).

Recent developments in translation studies have moved beyond viewing translators as mere linguistic technicians. Instead, translators are increasingly seen as active interpreters who make strategic decisions and

mediate between cultures. In literary translation, translators function as cultural mediators, bridging cultural gaps by interpreting meanings, negotiating differences, and ensuring that both the semantic content and cultural significance of the original text are conveyed (Yang & Wang, 2026; Zhao et al., 2025).

Cultural mediation is particularly important because literary works are deeply rooted in the social, historical, and cultural contexts from which they emerge. When translating such texts, translators must decide how to represent culturally specific elements in ways that preserve the integrity of the original while making the text accessible to the target audience. Without effective cultural mediation, important nuances may be misunderstood or lost (Wang, 2024).

This study therefore examines the roles a translator plays as a cultural mediator in literary translation. It explores how translators interpret cultural meanings, negotiate differences between source and target cultures, and preserve the cultural identity embedded in literary texts. By doing so, the study highlights the importance of cultural competence and interpretive skill in the translation process and contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural dimension of literary translation.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

This section explains the key concepts that form the theoretical and conceptual basis of this study. Understanding the notions of literary translation, culture in translation, and cultural mediation is essential for examining the role of translators as mediators between cultures in literary texts (Munday, 2016; Baker & Saldanha, 2020).

Literary Translation

Literary translation refers to the process of translating creative texts such as novels, plays, poetry, and short stories from one language into another while preserving not only the meaning but also the aesthetic, stylistic, and cultural qualities of the original work. Unlike other types of translation that primarily focus on the accurate transfer of information, literary translation involves the recreation of artistic expression, narrative voice, tone, and imagery (Baker & Saldanha, 2020). According to Bassnett (2014), literary translation requires the translator to reproduce “not only the message but also the style and cultural resonance of the original text” (p. 85). This makes literary translation a highly interpretive and creative activity.

One of the defining characteristics of literary translation is its emphasis on stylistic and aesthetic equivalence. Literary texts often contain figurative language, symbolism, humor, rhythm, and culturally embedded expressions that are difficult to render directly into another language. As noted by Newmark (1988), literary translation demands sensitivity to both linguistic nuance and cultural context because literary language is “connotative, expressive, and context-bound” (p. 162). Translators must therefore make careful decisions about how to reproduce the artistic qualities of the source text while ensuring that the translation remains meaningful and engaging for the target audience (Munday, 2016).

Literary translation differs significantly from other forms of translation such as technical, legal, or scientific translation. In technical translation, the primary objective is the accurate transfer of specialized information, terminology, and instructions. Precision and clarity are the main priorities, and stylistic considerations are usually secondary. In contrast, literary translation focuses on conveying the emotional tone, narrative voice, and cultural context of the original text. As Nida and Taber (1969) explain, while technical translation often aims for formal accuracy, literary translation requires dynamic and functional equivalence in order to evoke a similar response in the target audience (p. 12). Consequently, literary translators must combine linguistic competence with creativity and cultural awareness to recreate the literary experience for readers in another language (Baker & Saldanha, 2020).

Culture in Translation

Culture is a fundamental concept in translation studies because language itself is deeply embedded in cultural contexts. Culture can be understood as the system of values, beliefs, customs, traditions, and social practices that shape the worldview of a particular community. It encompasses not only tangible elements such as food, clothing, and rituals but also intangible aspects such as norms, attitudes, and patterns of communication (Hall, 1976). Because language is one of the primary means through which culture is expressed, translating a text inevitably involves transferring cultural meaning as well as linguistic content (House, 2015).

The close relationship between language and culture means that many linguistic expressions are culturally specific and may not have direct equivalents in other languages. Proverbs, idioms, metaphors, and culturally bound references often reflect the historical experiences, social values, and belief systems of a community. Nida (2001) emphasizes that “language and culture are so closely interrelated that translating from one language to another inevitably involves translating from one culture to another” (p. 13). This interdependence makes cultural competence an essential skill for translators, particularly in literary translation where cultural elements are often

central to the narrative (Munday, 2016).

In literary texts, culture may manifest in various forms, including traditional customs, religious beliefs, social hierarchies, folklore, and oral storytelling traditions. Translators must therefore interpret these cultural elements carefully and determine how best to convey them to readers who may not share the same cultural background. Failure to adequately account for cultural differences may result in misunderstanding, loss of meaning, or cultural misrepresentation (Baker & Saldanha, 2020).

Cultural Mediation

Cultural mediation is a key concept in contemporary translation studies and refers to the process through which translators bridge cultural gaps between the source and target communities. Rather than simply transferring words from one language to another, translators interpret cultural meanings and negotiate differences between cultural systems. Venuti (2012) notes that translation is inherently a cultural practice because it involves “the interpretation and recontextualization of a text within another cultural environment” (p. 18). Through this process, translators facilitate communication and understanding between cultures.

The concept of cultural mediation highlights the translator’s active and interpretive role in the translation process. Translators must analyze the cultural significance of the source text and decide how to represent it in the target language. These decisions may involve strategies such as retaining culturally specific terms, providing explanatory notes, adapting expressions, or finding culturally equivalent expressions in the target language. Such choices demonstrate that translation is not a purely mechanical activity but a complex process of intercultural negotiation (Munday, 2016).

Within this framework, the translator can be seen as an intercultural communicator who connects two linguistic and cultural communities. Bassnett and Lefevere (1998) argue that translators play a crucial role in shaping how literary works are interpreted and received in new cultural contexts (p. 8). Their decisions influence how readers understand the cultural values, identities, and experiences represented in translated texts.

By acting as cultural mediators, translators contribute to cross-cultural dialogue and the global circulation of literature. Their work enables readers to access stories and perspectives from other cultures while preserving the richness and diversity of the source text. Recognizing the translator’s mediating role therefore highlights the importance of cultural awareness, interpretive skill, and ethical responsibility in literary translation (Baker & Saldanha, 2020).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in major theories in translation studies that emphasize the cultural dimension of translation and the active role of translators in mediating meaning between cultures. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes translators not merely as linguistic transmitters but as intercultural interpreters who negotiate meanings across cultural contexts (Munday, 2016; Zhao et al., 2025). The present study draws on Dynamic Equivalence Theory, Skopos Theory, Cultural Translation Theory, and Venuti’s concepts of foreignization and domestication, which together highlight the importance of cultural awareness and strategic decision-making in literary translation.

Dynamic Equivalence Theory

Dynamic Equivalence Theory, developed by Eugene Nida, distinguishes between formal equivalence, which focuses on preserving the form of the source text, and dynamic equivalence, which seeks to produce a similar effect on the target audience (Nida & Taber, 1969, p. 12). According to Nida (2001), effective translation should evoke a response in the target readers that is comparable to that of the original audience (p. 82).

Recent studies reaffirm the relevance of this approach in literary translation, noting that translators must adapt culturally specific expressions to ensure meaningful communication across cultures (Wang, 2024; Chen, 2025). In literary texts, idioms, metaphors, and culturally bound expressions often require interpretive adjustments to preserve their emotional and cultural impact. Thus, dynamic equivalence highlights the translator’s role as a cultural mediator who negotiates meaning between the source and target cultures (Yang et al., 2025).

Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory, proposed by Hans J. Vermeer, shifts the focus of translation from strict equivalence to the purpose (skopos) of the translated text. According to Vermeer (1989), translation strategies should be guided primarily by the intended function of the translation in the target culture (p. 174).

This perspective emphasizes that translators must consider the expectations, cultural knowledge, and communicative needs of the target audience. Modern translation scholars similarly argue that translation decisions are shaped by the social and communicative context in which the translated text will be used (Li & Tekwa, 2025). Within this framework, translators act as cultural mediators who adapt texts in ways that fulfill

their intended purpose while maintaining essential cultural meanings.

Cultural Translation Theory

Cultural Translation Theory, associated with scholars such as Bassnett and Lefevere, views translation as a cultural act rather than merely a linguistic process. According to Bassnett and Lefevere (1998), translations are shaped by cultural, ideological, and historical contexts that influence how texts are interpreted and reproduced (p. 8).

Recent research continues to emphasize the cultural dimension of translation, arguing that translators must negotiate cultural identities, values, and social norms when transferring texts across languages (Yang & Wang, 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). In literary translation, where narratives often reflect the traditions and identities of specific communities, translators play a crucial role in interpreting and representing cultural meanings for new audiences.

Foreignization and Domestication

Another influential perspective is Venuti's distinction between foreignization and domestication. Domestication adapts the text to the cultural norms of the target audience, making it more familiar and accessible, while foreignization preserves elements of the source culture to highlight its distinctiveness (Venuti, 2012, p. 15).

Recent studies note that translators often combine both strategies to balance readability with cultural authenticity (Yang et al., 2025; Omar et al., 2025). These approaches illustrate how translators actively shape the reader's encounter with the source culture and demonstrate the ethical and cultural responsibilities involved in translation.

Relevance of the Theoretical Framework

Together, these theories provide a foundation for examining the translator's role as a cultural mediator in literary translation. Dynamic Equivalence Theory emphasizes the reproduction of cultural and emotional effects; Skopos Theory highlights the importance of the translation's purpose in the target culture; Cultural Translation Theory underscores the relationship between language and culture; and the concepts of foreignization and domestication explain the strategies translators use when negotiating cultural differences. Collectively, they show that translation is a process of cultural interpretation in which translators play a crucial role in facilitating cross-cultural understanding (Chen, 2025; Zhao et al., 2025).

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and reflective research design to examine the roles translators play as cultural mediators in literary translation. It focuses on textual interpretation and theoretical analysis to explore how translators negotiate cultural meaning across languages (Chen, 2025; Zhao et al., 2025).

Research Design

A qualitative approach is appropriate for translation studies because it allows for in-depth analysis of linguistic, cultural, and interpretive phenomena within texts (Munday, 2016; Li & Tekwa, 2025). This study uses reflective analysis to synthesize insights from translation theory and observe how translators mediate culture in literary texts. The design emphasizes understanding meaning and context rather than statistical testing (Creswell, 2014, p. 4).

Data Sources

Data are drawn from three sources:

Literary texts – to identify culturally embedded language, idioms, metaphors, and culturally specific references.

Translated works – to examine strategies translators use to convey cultural meaning in practice (Yang & Wang, 2025; Omar et al., 2025).

Scholarly literature – including works by Nida, Bassnett, and Venuti, providing theoretical perspectives on cultural mediation and translation strategies (Chen, 2025; Zhao et al., 2025).

These sources allow a combined theoretical and practical exploration of the translator's interpretive role.

Analytical Approach

The study employs textual analysis and conceptual reflection. Textual analysis identifies culturally specific expressions and examines how they are rendered in translation. Conceptual reflection synthesizes theoretical perspectives on cultural mediation, translation strategies, and intercultural communication (Yang et al., 2025). Combining these methods provides a comprehensive understanding of translators as active cultural mediators.

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on the cultural dimension of literary translation, including the interpretation of culturally specific expressions and negotiation of cultural differences. It is primarily theoretical and illustrative, emphasizing conceptual insights rather than exhaustive empirical analysis (Wang, 2024; Chen, 2025). While

translation practices vary across languages and historical contexts, the examples used illustrate broader principles relevant to cultural mediation in literary translation.

Despite these limitations, this methodology effectively explores how translators facilitate cross-cultural communication and highlights the interpretive, ethical, and cultural competencies required in literary translation (Zhao et al., 2025; Yang & Wang, 2025).

5. The Translator as a Cultural Mediator in Literary Translation

Literary translation is a complex intercultural activity in which translators play crucial roles beyond mere linguistic transfer. They interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct cultural meanings embedded in texts, balancing fidelity to the source with accessibility for target readers (Bassnett, 2014, p. 23; Zhao et al., 2025). The following section highlights the main roles of translators as cultural mediators.

Interpreter of Cultural Meaning

Translators decode culturally embedded elements—idioms, metaphors, folklore, and symbolic expressions—ensuring their meaning is preserved in the target language. Nida (2001) emphasizes that language and cultures are inseparable, making cultural competence essential. Recent studies highlight translators' interpretive work in rendering culture-specific expressions effectively for diverse audiences (Chen, 2025; Yang & Wang, 2025).

Negotiator between Source and Target Cultures

Translators constantly negotiate between source fidelity and target comprehensibility, deciding whether to retain, adapt, or explain cultural elements. Skopos Theory underscores that translation strategies should align with the text's purpose and audience expectations (Vermeer, 1989, p. 174; Li & Tekwa, 2025).

Preserver of Cultural Identity

Translators maintain the cultural integrity of literary works, preserving traditions, customs, and worldview. Venuti (2012) stresses that translators' choices determine whether a text highlights cultural differences or assimilates them. Recent research emphasizes the need to safeguard cultural identities in translation while making texts intelligible across cultures (Zhao et al., 2025).

Mediator of Historical and Social Context

Literary texts often embed historical, social, and ideological contexts. Translators interpret these elements to make them accessible without losing cultural depth. Bassnett and Lefevere (1998, p. 8) highlight that translation involves rewriting texts within the cultural and ideological framework of the target society. Contemporary studies underscore translators' role in contextualizing historical and social references for global audiences (Yang et al., 2025).

Creative Adapter of Literary Style

Translators recreate stylistic and aesthetic qualities, such as tone, rhythm, imagery, and narrative voice. Newmark (1988, p. 162) notes that literary translation balances accuracy with artistic expression. Recent research emphasizes that creative adaptation is crucial in evoking comparable emotional and aesthetic responses in target readers (Wang, 2024; Omar et al., 2025).

Ethical Representative of the Source Culture

Translators hold ethical responsibility to represent the source culture faithfully, avoiding distortion or stereotyping. Venuti (2012) emphasizes that translators' decisions shape how foreign cultures are perceived. Studies highlight the ethical dimension of translation in preserving cultural complexity and diversity (Chen, 2025; Zhao et al., 2025).

Cultural Educator for Target Readers

By introducing unfamiliar traditions and beliefs, translators act as cultural educators. Footnotes, glossaries, and contextual explanations help readers understand cultural references, fostering intercultural learning (Bassnett, 2014, p. 29; Yang & Wang, 2025).

Facilitator of Global Literary Exchange

Translators enable the international circulation of literature, connecting linguistic and cultural communities. Venuti (2012, p. 180) argues that translation is essential for world literature, allowing texts to cross boundaries and contribute to global discourse. Recent studies highlight translators' role in promoting literary diversity and cultural dialogue worldwide (Chen, 2025; Zhao et al., 2025).

Mediator of Ideological and Social Values

Translators also mediate ideological and social perspectives, ensuring that literary works convey the source culture's values without misrepresentation. This role has become increasingly significant in postcolonial and multicultural contexts, where translation shapes readers' understanding of social norms and power structures

(Yang et al., 2025; Omar et al., 2025).

Innovator in Cross-Cultural Expression

Finally, translators function as innovators, finding creative solutions to render untranslatable concepts, humor, and metaphors while maintaining literary quality. This innovative role bridges cultural gaps and enriches both the source and target literary traditions (Wang, 2024; Yang & Wang, 2025).

6. Challenges Faced by Translators as Cultural Mediators

Translators as cultural mediators face multiple challenges because literary texts are deeply embedded in cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. Their task goes beyond linguistic proficiency, requiring careful negotiation of cultural, stylistic, and ideological content (Zhao et al., 2025; Yang & Wang, 2025).

Cultural Untranslatability

Cultural untranslatability occurs when concepts, practices, or norms have no direct equivalents in the target culture. Translators must choose whether to retain, adapt, or explain such elements, balancing fidelity with accessibility (Nida, 2001, p. 47; Chen, 2025). Examples include Yoruba terms like *egungun* or *nyama*, where translators weigh explanatory notes, substitution, or analogous concepts.

Idiomatic Expressions and Proverbs

Idioms, proverbs, and figurative expressions reflect social norms, moral values, and historical experiences. Direct translation risks loss of meaning or misinterpretation. Translators often employ paraphrasing, explanatory notes, or culturally equivalent expressions to preserve both meaning and style (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1998, p. 52; Wang, 2024).

Oral Traditions and Storytelling Techniques

Oral narrative elements—repetition, rhythm, call-and-response, or digressions—pose challenges in written translation. These features are culturally and performatively bound, requiring careful adaptation to retain narrative effect (Nida & Taber, 1969, p. 105; Omar et al., 2025).

Linguistic Hybridity

Many texts blend indigenous and dominant languages to reflect identity, resistance, or sociolinguistic realities. Translators must balance foreignization and domestication while preserving meaning and style (Venuti, 2012, p. 21; Zhao et al., 2025). For example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's use of Gikuyu in English texts requires strategic translational decisions to maintain authenticity.

Ideological and Ethical Dilemmas

Translators encounter ideological and ethical challenges when texts reflect values, histories, or norms that may conflict with target audience expectations. Ethical mediation involves representing the source culture accurately while avoiding distortion or stereotyping (Bassnett, 2014, p. 76; Yang et al., 2025). Sensitive topics such as colonial histories, gender roles, or religious practices demand careful interpretive choices.

These challenges highlight that literary translation is culturally sensitive and interpretively complex. Translators must navigate untranslatable elements, idiomatic expressions, oral storytelling, linguistic hybridity, and ideological concerns while maintaining fidelity, readability, and cultural integrity. These complexities reinforce the translator's role as an active cultural mediator, with interpretive, creative, and ethical responsibilities (Chen, 2025; Wang, 2024; Zhao et al., 2025).

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the multifaceted roles that translators play as cultural mediators in literary translation. The analysis demonstrates that translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but a complex process that involves interpreting, negotiating, and conveying the cultural meanings embedded in literary texts. Translators act as interpreters of proverbs, idioms, and metaphors; negotiators between source and target cultures; preservers of cultural identity; mediators of historical and social context; creative adapters of literary style; ethical representatives of the source culture; cultural educators for target audiences; and facilitators of global literary exchange. Each of these roles highlights the active and interpretive function of the translator in bridging cultural gaps and enabling cross-cultural understanding.

The challenges faced by translators—such as cultural untranslatability, idiomatic expressions, oral narrative techniques, linguistic hybridity, and ideological dilemmas—further underscore the necessity for a high level of cultural awareness, linguistic creativity, and ethical sensitivity. As Nida (2001) emphasizes, language cannot be separated from culture, and effective translation requires careful mediation of cultural meaning (p. 13). Likewise, Venuti (2012) notes that translators have a significant influence on how foreign cultures are perceived and understood in the target context (p. 15).

Overall, this study reaffirms that translators are not passive conduits of language but active cultural agents whose interpretive decisions shape the reception and understanding of literature across borders. The importance of cultural competence, contextual knowledge, and ethical responsibility in translation cannot be overstated. Translators' ability to navigate these factors determines whether literary texts maintain their authenticity and resonate with global audiences, preserving both artistic and cultural integrity.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of translators as cultural mediators:

Develop Deep Cultural Competence

Translators should cultivate a thorough understanding of the source culture, including its social norms, historical background, folklore, and idiomatic language. Such competence enables accurate and sensitive mediation of cultural meaning (Bassnett, 2014, p. 29).

Foster Collaboration with Cultural Experts

Translators should engage with anthropologists, historians, literary scholars, and native speakers to ensure that culturally specific concepts are accurately interpreted and represented in the target language. Collaborative approaches can mitigate the risk of misrepresentation or cultural distortion.

Emphasize Culture-oriented Training Programs

Translation curricula should prioritize the development of skills related to cultural interpretation, intercultural communication, and literary analysis, alongside linguistic proficiency. Programs should include modules on culturally embedded narrative techniques, figurative language, and ethical decision-making in translation (Newmark, 1988, p. 162).

Encourage Contextual Annotation and Explanatory Strategies

Translators should consider using footnotes, glossaries, or endnotes to provide readers with the necessary background for understanding culturally specific terms, proverbs, or historical references. Such strategies enhance comprehension while preserving the cultural richness of the source text (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1998, p. 52).

By implementing these recommendations, translators can strengthen their role as cultural mediators, ensuring that literary works retain both their aesthetic and cultural integrity. Ultimately, such practices contribute to the broader goals of intercultural understanding, global literary exchange, and the ethical dissemination of literature across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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