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Translated Fiction and the Changing Shape of World Literary Circulation

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Abstract

British readers bought 2.9 million works of translated fiction in 2016 and 3.8 million in 2025, with market value rising from 23.2 million to 40.7 million pounds. Over the same decade the source languages changed: Swedish, French and Italian gave way to Japanese, French and Russian. This article reads that shift as evidence of a structural rearrangement in world literary circulation rather than a passing fashion. It examines three linked developments. The first is the reconstitution of the International Booker Prize in 2016 as an annual award splitting its purse equally between author and translator, a change that made translation visible as labour and produced winners from Korean, Hindi, Kannada and Mandarin Chinese within a decade. The second is the arrival of a young, unexpectedly male readership for translated fiction in Britain, which inverts long standing assumptions about who reads across languages. The third is machine translation, which a Society of Authors survey found had already cost more than a third of literary translators paid work by 2024. Reading these against Casanova, Damrosch and Apter, the article argues that the centre of gravity in world literature is moving without the critical vocabulary moving with it, and that translation studies now has to describe a marketplace it once mainly critiqued from outside.

Keywords: - Translation Studies, World Literature, International Booker Prize, Literary Circulation, Publishing, Machine Translation.

I. INTRODUCTION

On 19 May 2026, at Tate Modern in London, the International Booker Prize went to Taiwan Travelogue by Yang Shuang-zi, translated by Lin King. It was the first book translated from Mandarin Chinese to take the award and the first by a Taiwanese author (Booker Prize Foundation, 2026). The novel turns on a Japanese writer touring colonial Taiwan in the nineteen thirties with a local interpreter, which makes the subject of the book and the condition of its arrival in English uncomfortably continuous. A prize for translation went to a novel about the politics of being translated.

This was not an isolated result. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* took the newly reconstituted prize in 2016. Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*, translated from Hindi by Daisy Rockwell, won in 2022. Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, translated from Kannada by Deepa Bhashti, won in 2025 and was the first short story collection to do so (Booker Prize Foundation, 2025). Han Kang went on to the Nobel in 2024. Laszlo Krasznahorkai, whose reputation in English rests entirely on the work of two translators, took the Nobel in 2025 (Nobel Prize Outreach, 2025).

Something is happening to the movement of literature between languages, and the sales figures confirm that it is not confined to prize juries. British purchases of translated fiction rose from 2.9 million copies worth 23.2 million pounds in 2016 to 3.8 million copies worth 40.7 million pounds in 2025, with physical sales posting double digit growth in the final year (NielsenIQ, 2026). The composition changed as much as the volume. Scandinavian crime, which dominated the earlier period, has been displaced by Japanese fiction, and readers are younger than the trade expected.

The argument of this article is that these developments require an adjustment to how world literature is theorised. The dominant frameworks were built to explain why literature circulated badly, and they explain that very well. They are less useful for describing a period in which it circulates unevenly but rather more freely, driven by commercial intermediaries and social platforms rather than by the consecrating capitals those frameworks identified. A closing section takes up machine translation, which threatens to remove the human labour on which the whole arrangement depends.

II. THE INHERITED MAP AND ITS LIMITS

Casanova (2004) described an international literary space with its own economy, its own currency of prestige, and a small number of consecrating centres, Paris above all, through which peripheral writers had to pass in order to become universal. Translation in this account is less a service than a border crossing, and the border is guarded. Damrosch (2003) offered a gentler formulation, defining world literature as writing that gains rather than loses in translation, and as a mode of circulation and reading rather than a canon.

Both accounts assume a fairly stable hierarchy of languages. Moretti (2000) made this explicit with a core and periphery model borrowed from world systems theory, in which formal innovation flows outward from a few dominant literatures and local material is fitted to imported forms. Apter (2013) objected to the entire project, arguing that the world literature paradigm flattens difference into a market of exchangeable commodities and that untranslatability should be defended rather than dissolved.

The objection retains force, though the empirical ground has shifted under it. Sapiro (2016) sorted the factors governing whether a literary work crosses borders into political, economic, cultural and social categories, and noted two competing tendencies in the transnational field, one pulling towards isomorphism and the other towards differentiation. The last decade has supplied evidence for both at once. A globally legible literary novel exists and sells. So does a market for work that resists that legibility, and the second market is growing faster.

Walkowitz (2015) identified a category of contemporary fiction written with translation in mind, works born translated, which anticipate their own circulation and treat the original language as one edition among several. This is now a commonplace of literary production rather than an avant garde position. What is less remarked is the countercurrent. *Heart Lamp* is deeply embedded in the Muslim communities of Karnataka and makes almost no concession to a reader outside them, and its translator has written about deliberately retaining Kannada, Urdu and Arabic words rather than smoothing them into English. It won anyway.

III. MAKING THE TRANSLATOR VISIBLE

Venuti (2008) argued that Anglophone publishing had developed a norm of fluency that rendered translators invisible, producing texts that read as though composed in English and effacing the mediation that made them available. The complaint was accurate and remained accurate for decades. Translators went uncredited on covers, unmentioned in reviews, and unpaid in royalties.

The reconstitution of the International Booker Prize in 2016 changed the incentive structure. By awarding a single book annually and splitting fifty thousand pounds equally between author and translator, the prize made translation a named and remunerated act at the most visible point in the British literary calendar. Campaigns followed. Jennifer Croft's public refusal in 2021 to translate books without cover credit, supported by a substantial body of authors, moved several major publishers to change practice.

The Vegetarian episode is worth examining precisely because it went wrong. After Han Kang and Deborah Smith shared the 2016 award, Korean critics documented substantial departures from the source text, including added sentences, altered registers and misread idioms. The ensuing argument was conducted in English and Korean with rather different assumptions about what a translation is for. Emmerich (2017) offers the most useful frame: translation does not reproduce an original so much as constitute one, since the notion of a stable source text is itself partly an artefact of the translation process.

Visibility has costs as well as benefits. A named translator can be blamed, and the labour has become more exposed at the same moment that its economics have worsened. Bassnett (2014) observed that translation studies spent its formative decades arguing for the discipline's legitimacy against a literary establishment that regarded translation as secondary work. That argument has largely been won in the academy and in the prize culture. It has not been won in the contracts.

IV. INDIAN LANGUAGES INTO ENGLISH

Two of the last five International Booker awards went to books translated from Indian languages. In 2015 that would have seemed improbable. *Tomb of Sand* carried an eight hundred page Hindi novel of Partition memory into English through a translation that chose to reproduce Shree's puns rather than explain them, which is a harder undertaking and a much riskier one. *Heart Lamp* did something else again. It brought thirty years of Kannada short fiction about Muslim women's lives in Karnataka to readers with no prior exposure to the tradition at all.

The domestic infrastructure behind this deserves more credit than it receives abroad. Indian publishing has built translation lists over two decades, the Sahitya Akademi has awarded translation prizes since the nineteen eighties, and the JCB Prize for Literature, until its suspension, repeatedly recognised translated fiction over original English writing. Benyamin's *Goat Days*, Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and the Malayalam and Tamil lists that followed them established that a translated Indian novel could sell in India before any foreign attention arrived.

Mukherjee (2006) argued that translation in the subcontinent has never been a marginal activity but the ordinary condition of literary life, since Indian readers and writers have always moved between languages as a matter of course. Devy (1992) pressed the point further, describing a critical amnesia in which Indian literary theory was displaced by imported categories that could not account for a multilingual literature. Both arguments sit awkwardly with the current celebration, since what is being celebrated is arrival in English.

A structural asymmetry survives underneath the good news. Kannada reaches Malayalam readers mainly through English, and Bengali reaches Marathi the same way, so English functions as the hub language of a literature whose components are geographically adjacent and mutually intelligible in ways English is not. Trivedi (2007) distinguished the translation of culture from the fashionable metaphor of cultural translation and warned that the metaphor was displacing the practice. The warning applies. Prize visibility in London does very little for the Kannada to Marathi translator, who remains unfunded and largely unpublished.

V. WHO READS IN TRANSLATION NOW

The trade's working assumption for years was that translated fiction served an older, literary, predominantly female readership concentrated in a handful of cities. Recent purchasing data breaks that picture. Buyers of translated fiction in Britain now skew markedly younger than buyers of fiction generally, and the gender balance has shifted towards male readers, a reversal of the pattern in almost every other fiction category (NielsenIQ, 2026).

Japanese fiction accounts for much of this. The category that publishers have taken to calling healing fiction, comfortable novels set in bookshops, cafes and libraries, sells in very large quantities to readers in their twenties. So does Japanese literary horror, and so do the translated works of Haruki Murakami and Mieko Kawakami. Korean fiction follows a similar curve, helped considerably by the wider cultural traffic that brought Korean film, television and music to the same demographic.

Two mechanisms seem to be operating. The first is the platform effect described in studies of social reading: recommendation systems do not know or care what language a book was written in, and a novel that produces a strong affective response travels regardless of origin. The second is that a generation raised on subtitled streaming has no particular anxiety about foreign material. Cronin (2003) anticipated part of this, arguing that globalisation would multiply rather than reduce the demand for translation, though he expected the growth in technical rather than literary work.

The optimism should be qualified. Translation remains a small fraction of Anglophone publishing output, in the region of three per cent by most counts, and the growth is concentrated in a few source languages. Huggan (2001) warned that the metropolitan appetite for otherness produces its own commodity form, the postcolonial exotic, in which difference is packaged for consumption at the centre. Brouillette (2007) extended the analysis to authors who write knowingly within that market. The current boom in Japanese comfort fiction is not obviously exempt from either critique.

VI. THE MACHINERY BEHIND THE CIRCULATION

Books do not cross languages because readers want them to. They cross because somebody pays for the translation before anybody knows whether it will sell. That funding is largely public and largely invisible in critical accounts of world literature, which tend to jump from the text to its reception without examining the grant application in between.

The pattern is easy to trace once looked for. Korean fiction's arrival in English rests substantially on the Literature Translation Institute of Korea, established in the nineteen nineties and funded as cultural policy. Japanese, French, German, Dutch and Nordic literatures all have comparable bodies. English PEN's translation programme and Arts Council England subsidise a large share of the translated titles published by British independents. The geography of translated fiction in English is, to an underappreciated degree, a map of which governments decided literature was worth exporting.

This has consequences that cut both ways. State funding has made possible a body of work that no commercial calculation would have supported, and small presses such as those that published the recent prize winners could not operate without it. It also means that literatures without a sponsoring state are structurally disadvantaged, which describes most of Africa, much of South Asia and the stateless languages everywhere. Sapiro's political and economic categories describe this precisely, and the political category is doing more work than the aesthetic one.

Hahn (2022) kept a diary while translating a novel and then published it. It is among the more useful documents in the field, because it records the decisions rather than the theory. What emerges is how little of the work is linguistic. Chasing permissions, negotiating fees, arguing about a cover, explaining to a publisher why a sentence cannot lose four words to fit the page design: that is the job for weeks at a stretch. The romance of the invisible translator has given way to a visible one who is also, increasingly, an unpaid publicist.

VII. THE MACHINE AT THE DOOR

In January 2024 the Society of Authors surveyed its members about generative systems. Of the translators who responded, thirty six per cent said they had already lost work to the technology and forty three per cent reported falling income, figures well above those for any other creative category surveyed (Society of Authors, 2024). Publishers in several European markets have begun issuing machine drafts for human post editing, at rates substantially below the translation fee.

The literary case against this is usually made on grounds of quality, and the case is real though narrower than its advocates suppose. Current systems handle plot serviceably and register badly. They flatten dialect, lose the joke, resolve deliberate ambiguity in the wrong direction, and have no way to decide whether a Kannada word should stay Kannada.

Bhasthi's choice to leave such words standing is a critical judgement about the reader's relation to the text, not a linguistic operation.

The structural case matters more. Post editing pays less than translating, requires the same expertise, and offers no credit. A generation of literary translators is unlikely to be trained under those conditions, and the skills involved take fifteen years to develop and cannot be reconstituted quickly once lost. Spivak (2003) argued that comparative literature needed to rebuild itself around deep language learning rather than around English mediated reading, and the current economics push in precisely the opposite direction.

The reasonable prediction is bifurcation. Commercial genre translation, high volume and low margin, will substantially automate within a decade. Literary translation at the level the International Booker recognises will not, because the judgements it requires are interpretive rather than linguistic. What is uncertain is whether the second can survive the collapse of the first, since the commercial work has always subsidised the literary work, and translators who cannot pay rent do not translate novels.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The map of world literature has been redrawn faster than the theory describing it. Casanova's consecrating centre has weakened without disappearing, since London and New York still confer the prizes, but the traffic no longer passes through Paris and the languages arriving are not the ones the model predicted. Kannada, Hindi and Mandarin have reached English readers within a decade through a prize mechanism designed in Britain and a discovery mechanism designed in China.

Three claims seem defensible. Translation has become visible as labour, which is a real gain won by campaigning rather than granted by the industry. The readership has changed shape in ways the trade did not anticipate and does not fully understand. And the economic base of the whole arrangement is being eroded at exactly the moment its cultural standing is highest, which is an unstable combination.

For scholarship the implication is uncomfortable. The influential accounts of world literature were written from a position of critical distance from the market, treating commercial circulation as the object of analysis rather than the terrain of practice. That posture is harder to sustain when the questions that matter most are questions about contracts, credit lines, royalty splits and the rate paid for post editing. Apter's defence of untranslatability now has a very concrete referent, which is the set of decisions a machine cannot make and a human is no longer paid to make.

Taiwan Travelogue ends with its narrator's account of what the interpreter did and did not convey, and what was lost between them, which is a fair description of the condition of reading in translation at any period. The difference in this one is that the interpreter is finally named on the cover, and may shortly be replaced.

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