

## Would Comparative Literature be replaced by Translation Studies?

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### ABSTRACT

*This essay will discuss the argument by Susan Bassnett in 1993 as she remains one of the most important and powerful contributions in the field of translation studies to this day. It will focus upon the contribution made by Bassnett to the discipline of translation studies and assess her argument that comparative literature will be replaced by translation studies in the future. In this essay Bassnett's contributions to the field of translation studies will be assessed, her broad conception of the concept of translation studies will be put forward, her analysis of the relationship between translation studies and comparative literature will be outlined and the assessments of Bassnett's argument will be examined. The conclusion will argue that the argument made by Bassnett in 1993 that comparative literature would be replaced by translation studies cannot be adequately defended.*

**Keywords:** *Academic, Translation, Comparative Literature, Susan Bassnett, Language and Culture*

### INTRODUCTION

The argument put forward by Susan Bassnett in 1993 remains one of the most important and powerful contributions in the field of translation studies to this day. Now serving as the Professor in the Centre for Translation and Comparative Cultural Studies, which she founded in 1980, Susan Bassnett continues to be one of the most important academics in her field. Her seminal book entitled *Translation Studies* is one of the most important works in the field of translation studies and is regarded as the foremost textbook on translation studies for students across the world. This essay will focus upon the contribution made by Bassnett to the discipline of translation studies and assess her argument that comparative literature will be replaced by translation studies in the future. This essay will be divided into three clear sections. The first section of this investigation will seek to clearly define the two key terms employed throughout the course of this analysis. This is a vital task, because in order to be able to establish whether comparative literature will be replaced by translation studies in the future one must first of all proceed from a clear understanding of the two concepts. The second section will outline the argument of Bassnett made in 1993 in great depth. In this section Bassnett's contributions to

the field of translation studies will be assessed, her broad conception of the concept of translation studies will be put forward and her analysis of the relationship between translation studies and comparative literature will be outlined.

In the third and final section of this investigation the assessments of Bassnett's argument will be examined. In this section both the case of those scholars supporting her argument as well as those critical of her stance will be assessed in order to determine whether her arguments can withstand critical scrutiny. In addition to the contribution of other scholars Bassnett's own reflections on her original argument, published in an article in 2006 will be analysed. The conclusion will argue that the argument made by Bassnett in 1993 that comparative literature would be replaced by translation studies cannot be adequately defended.

### DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

In the first section of this essay it is important to define some of the key concepts that will be analysed throughout the course of this investigation. In order to be able to assess whether comparative literature could potentially be replaced by translation studies in the future one must first of all establish clear working

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definitions of both concepts. The notion of comparative literature refers to an academic discipline in which literature from different national, cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds are compared with one another. Kumar Das argues that the concept of comparative literature is not one that is defined easily. The reason why a clear definition of the term often proves elusive is because “it involves not one but two literatures at the same time”. The fact that comparative literature involves the analysis of two literatures simultaneously means that the “scope of this literature is broader than that of single literatures and even national literatures”. In addition to this, comparative literature is not exclusively based upon analysis of texts from different national backgrounds, but the concept can also refer to an analysis of pieces of literature that stem from the same language but emerge from a different linguistic culture within this context. According to Kumar Das, the “simple way to define comparative literature is to say that it is a comparison between two literatures and does not have an independent status”. Shaffer settles for a narrower definition of the term, defining comparative literature as the process in which the “varying relations of social development to literary development are held steadily in view”.

Kumar Das offers a far broader conception of the term and argues that comparative literature “analyses the similarities and dissimilarities and parallels between two literatures. It further studies themes, modes, conventions, and the use of folk tales, myths in two different literatures and even more”. It is clear, therefore, that a large number of different definitions of the concept of comparative literature have been put forward. Perhaps the most useful for the course of this investigation is the one offered by Brown, which managed to define the concept in the simplest possible terms. Bernhart defines the notion of comparative literature along the lines of Brown and argues that this is perhaps the most famous and accepted interpretation of the concept. Brown argues that “if we define comparative literature as any study of literature involving at least two different media of expression, a good many difficulties in classification will disappear”. This definition provides one with perhaps the clearest interpretation of the concept of comparative literature and therefore will be the definition of the concept that will be deployed throughout the remainder of this essay.

In contrast to the notion of comparative

literature, the concept of translation studies refers to the process of systematically analysing the underlying theories of translation and the manner in which the concept of translation is applied and defined. As Riccardi shows, translation studies have emerged as a distinct academic discipline only relatively recently. He shows that since the end of the Second World War the greater need for translation at all levels of economic, cultural and social life have led to “translations and their study becoming the object of uninterrupted scholarly investigation, while in the past most translation studies or theories were the result of translators’ reflections on their own activity and not of systematic investigation of the topic”. The field of translation studies is generally considered to consist of three primary areas and this division owes much to the work of James Holmes, a pioneer in the development of translation studies. Holmes initially divided translation studies into “pure translation studies” and “applied translation studies” and then put forward the notion that “descriptive, theoretical, and applied translation studies should be presented as three fairly distinct branches of the entire discipline”.

This approach to translation studies has been welcomed by scholars such as Susan Bassnett, because in their view it elevates the discipline of translation to its rightful place as an independent academic discipline. Too often, Bassnett argues, translation studies have simply been considered a lowly and subsidiary activity rather than as a skill and even an artform in itself. As Bassnett shows, the work in major translations such as those of Shakespeare and Homer have only tended to be considered from one perspective while the other equally important perspective is almost completely ignored. “What is analysed in such studies is the product only, the end result of the translation process and not the process itself”. Bassnett’s conception of the notion of translation studies will be analysed in greater depth later in this investigation, but her assertion in this passage that translation ought to be considered as an art form in itself is echoed by other scholars. For example, Venuti shows that the history of translation studies is littered with references to “the art” or “the craft” of translation and Zuber-Skerritt argues that “a new appreciation of translation as an art form has recently developed that continues to be valid to this day”.

It is clear, therefore, that the discipline of translation studies has risen to prominence in

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recent years and that one must distinguish the concept of translation studies from that of the notion of comparative literature. As Kumar Das shows, the fundamental difference between the process of translation and the notion of comparative literature is the fact that a “translator deals with two languages, the Source language (SL) and the target language (TL) and renders the SL text into the TL text”. A comparatist, on the other hand, “deals with two literatures and this literature (CL) does not belong to either of the two literatures which go into the making of it”. It is clear, therefore, that translation studies is a relatively nascent and rapidly growing area of academic interest and that it must be distinguished from the notion of comparative literature.

### SUSAN BASSNETT’S ARGUMENT

It is important now to move on to assess Susan Bassnett’s argument claiming that comparative literature would be replaced by translation studies. Bassnett is one of the most influential scholars to have approached the field of translation studies and her book entitled ‘Translation Studies’ remains a seminal piece of work in the discipline. The book was originally published in 1980 and has been reprinted many times since that point due to its popularity and it remains one of the key “textbooks” used by undergraduates in order to approach the topic of translation studies.

The reason why her book is of such value is due to the fact that it sets out to denote a new field of academic study. The work of Bassnett’s continues to be of importance because “not only does it report on the latest development in the field of translation studies, but it also points to new directions for the discipline for the next millennium”. Owens argues that the rise of translation studies during the 1980s and 1990s as an academic discipline was of immense importance because “it raised awareness across the disciplines of the need to think more scientifically about translation, and allowed scholars to theorise about translation in a more sophisticated way, which is more fitting to the needs of a rapidly changing intellectual landscape”. According to Owens, the work of Bassnett and others ensured that “today, thinking about translation is entering a new phase. Translation is no longer seen as a narrowly circumscribed technical field; in the twenty-first century it is recognisably right at the centre of human communication”.

Susan Bassnett argues that translation studies

should be seen as being comprised of four areas of interest and that these areas of interest fall into two general categories. Two of these areas are “product-oriented”, meaning that the focus on the functional aspects of the target language in relation to the source language text and the other two areas are “process oriented”, because they emphasise the analysis of what precisely takes place during the process of translation. The first area of interest identified by Bassnett is a category she refers to as the History of Translation. It involves an investigation of how the concept of translation and theories of translation have engaged with literary history over time and includes analysis of such areas as the methodological development of translation and examinations of the work of individual translators. The second area of interest identified by Bassnett is Translation in the Target Language Culture. This category involves an examination of how translation impacts upon culture and vice versa and can include analysis of individual texts within a particular cultural context or investigations of “the norms of the translated text into the TL system and on the principles of selection operating within that system”. The third area of interest focuses upon Translation and Linguistics. These types of investigations place their emphasis on the comparative arrangement of linguistic elements between the SL and the TL text with regard to phonemic, morphemic, lexical, syntagmatic and syntactic levels”. It attempts to locate problems with the process of translation on a variety of different levels. The fourth and final area of interest identified by Bassnett is the field of Translation and Poetics. This area focuses upon the process of translating a variety of different literary texts, whether this is translating poetry or sub-titles for cinema for example. Above all else, the primary focus of this category is to establish a coherent theory of literary translation. Bassnett adds one further area of interest to the ones listed above and she refers to this as the “one final great stumbling block waiting for the person with an interest in Translation Studies: the question of evaluation”. Bassnett argues that assessment and evaluation are inextricably linked with the culture in which the translator operates. As Crisafulli argues, “translation is never innocent. There is always a context in which the translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed”. As a consequence, Bassnett argues that a clear and transferable definition of translation can never be established, because the process and idea of

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translation can not be removed from the environment in which it operates. "It is pointless, therefore, to argue for a definitive translation, since translation is intimately tied up with the context in which it is made". It is clear, therefore, the discipline of translation studies is an expansive area of academic interest in the view of Susan Bassnett and that it is inextricably linked to the culture and environment in which it is formed.

As has been shown above, Bassnett clearly presents a broad conception of the concept of translation studies and she argued that as a consequence the field of translation studies would have a large impact upon other related academic disciplines. Bassnett claimed that translation studies were "exploring new ground, bridging as it does the gap between the vast area of stylistics, literary history, linguistics, semiotics and aesthetics". She argues that the growth of the discipline and the breadth of its enquiry would lead to a role reversal in the relationship between translation studies and comparative literature. Traditionally, translation studies were regarded as a "sub-branch of linguistics" and during the early years of the discipline it was not uncommon for there to be heated debates amongst scholars regarding its place within the spectrum of linguistics and comparative literature. Advocates arguing in favour of placing translation studies on an equal footing with other disciplines were motivated by the belief that it was important to move the study of translation out from under the umbrella of either comparative literature or applied linguistics, and fierce polemics arguing for the autonomy of Translation Studies were common". However, according to Bassnett the growth of translation studies as a discipline has pushed such former disputes firmly to the past and there is little debate about the equal place that translation studies hold in the academic world today. However, Bassnett's argument goes far further than to assume that translation studies would merely be considered as the equal of other disciplines such as comparative literature that once were considered its superior. Instead of assuming that one should seek to locate translation studies within the field of comparative literature, a relationship that had long undermined translation studies in the view of Bassnett, she argued that "translation studies should be seen as the discipline within which comparative literature might be located, rather than the other way around". This line of argument in addition to the comprehensive

conception of the notion of translation studies meant that the ideas of Bassnett were groundbreaking views on the role that translation studies ought to play in the future and how the relationship between translation studies and comparative literature should be understood.

Bassnett argued that the emergence of translation studies as an important academic discipline was not the only reason to consider a role reversal in the traditional relationship between comparative literature and translation studies. She believed that one could clearly observe that parallel to the growth of translation studies the influence of comparative literature was beginning to wane. Bassnett argues that the process of globalisation and its impact upon cultural identity is fundamentally changing the extent to which comparative literature is relevant in the modern world. According to Bassnett, the discipline of translation studies has managed to abandon "its evangelical phase as an oppositional force to traditional literary studies and is looking more closely at questions of hegemonic relations in text production". The broad conception of translation studies offered by Bassnett shows how translation effects and is affected by a variety of academic disciplines such as cultural studies and politics. According to Bassnett, it is its ability to understand how a host of other factors impact upon the process of translation that marks translation studies out and places it above comparative literature. As Baker shows, Bassnett's argument has fundamentally changed the manner in which translation studies are understood. Baker argues that a substantial impulse to the adoption of translation as a wide-ranging "theoretical model and to its frequent conjunction with notions of mobility has come, in particular, from the shift towards a cultural, rather than strictly linguistic understanding of translation processes, which in turn produced what Bassnett called the translation turn in cultural studies". In the view of Bassnett, comparative literature cannot comprehend the cultural and political context of the texts that it analysed and too often focuses upon a strictly literal interpretation of the texts it examines, thereby missing the whole point in the course of analysis. In contrast, translation studies are intimately tied to their cultural environment and "any assessment of a translation can only be made by taking into account both the process of creating it and its function in a given context". Bassnett also argues that comparative literature has changed in another important respect. The

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traditional model of comparative literature was seen by Bassnett as devoid of factors such as national character or political context and Zhang shows that what “Bassnett’s terms ‘the American school’ and ‘the formalist approach’ refer to the study of literature for purely aesthetic values”. This approach to comparative literature, “or what she calls ‘the literature-as-universal-civilising-force-approach’ is now dead”. Cass shows that Bassnett’s argument heralded the end of an era for comparative literature, because it had “failed to define itself and rejected calls for clearer definitions of scope and methodology”. In contrast, “translation studies has concerned itself with texts and with contexts, with practice and with theory”. This fundamental change in the nature of comparative literature now means that comparative literature will have to accept its place as a mere sub-branch of translation studies and thereby completing the role reversal that has taken place between the two disciplines.

### ASSESSING BASSNETT’S ARGUMENT

Susan Bassnett’s argument that comparative literature would be replaced by translation studies has been supported by a number of academics. Damrosch agrees with Bassnett’s assessment that comparative literature is a declining discipline, arguing that “literary scholarship today needs primarily a realization of the need to define its subject matter and focus”. According to Damrosch, comparative literature is the archetypal example of a discipline that has failed to take this into account and as a result comparative literature has become “in its methods and methodological reflections, to put it bluntly, a stagnant backwater”. In contrast, the field translation studies represents a growing and dynamic academic discipline that has clearly defined its objectives by “helping to shift the focus away from purely linguistic concerns toward a broader study of culture”. Frank also supports Bassnett’s argument calling for comparative literature to be replaced by translation studies. In particular, Frank concentrates upon the extent to which Bassnett helped to initiate a cultural turn on translation studies and argues that it is this change in the conception of translation studies that distinguishes it from the field of comparative literature. “Translation studies looks at translations, and translation studies are actually to be found in the target cultures, not source ones”. Frank’s argument asserts that the decline of comparative literature is the result of the inability of the discipline to incorporate

important cultural and political contexts into its work and therefore its relevance in contemporary literary analysis has waned. It is not acceptable in this view to simply compare two source texts, as is the case in comparative literature, because a comparative analysis must proceed from an appreciation of a wider set of factors than simply the source texts themselves. Indeed, this line of argument has gone so far that some scholars have firmly relegated the importance of source texts in their work to concentrate on the wider issues raised. “The texts themselves become secondary: they are studied as evidence of something else, such as norms, cultural relations and power relations”. It is clear, therefore, that Bassnett’s argument has found significant support amongst a number of academics.

However, Bassnett’s argument has also been subjected to a number of important criticisms. According to Saussy, Bassnett’s argument proceeds from a complete misunderstanding of the concept of comparative literature. She shows that Bassnett’s argument asserts that “literary studies involves primarily the forces that make words legible rather than concentrating on the formal properties of the works themselves”. According to Bassnett comparative literature had shown itself to be intellectually and ideologically incapable of understanding the formal properties of works themselves because of its “positivist legacy and other factors and she designated postcolonial studies and translation studies as two fields that in 1993 were undertaking more or less what comparative literature ought to be have been doing”. However, the problem with Bassnett’s argument is that it proceeds from a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept of comparative literature and the history of its practical application. “Bassnett omits the fact that at many junctures in its history comparative literature has considered exactly the types of questions she endorses: what is read and by whom, how literature is received across cultures, what translation makes both evident and obscure”. Saussy accuses Bassnett of simply rephrasing old questions in order to make them contemporary again and therefore offers a damning indictment of both the content and originality of her argument. Boldrini offers a nuanced criticism of Bassnett, arguing that even if one accepts that comparative literature is in crisis as Bassnett suggests, this may not necessarily be a problem, but could be seen as perhaps indicative of a larger positive trend. As

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Boldrini points out, “debates about comparative literature and its (recurrent) crises are healthy: by forcing us to constantly re-interrogate our critical readings it keeps our vigilance over our own practices high, and our complacent sense of having “the” answer low(er)”. Another important line of criticism is advanced by Shaffer and she undermines Bassnett’s argument by claiming that the questions she raises are not substantial enough to consider a role reversal between comparative literature and translation studies. Whilst conceding that Bassnett does raise some important questions, Shaffer argues they are “important enough to claim, as Bassnett does, that all research in comparative literature can be subsumed under the name translation studies”. She rejects Bassnett’s argument that translation studies can help to introduce new categories for enquiry, enabling “cultural transfer between languages and culturo-poetic systems”. According to Shaffer, excessive focus upon translation at the cost of comparative analysis would “narrow the perspective of students beyond repair”.

It is clear, therefore, that a number of important criticisms of Bassnett’s argument have been put forward, claiming that she misunderstood the concept of comparative literature and that her questions do not merit the assertion that translation studies should replace comparative literature. However, perhaps the most damning criticism of Bassnett’s argument was made by Bassnett herself in 2006 when she questioned the validity of the argument she had earlier put forward. In an article entitled ‘Reflections on Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century’ Bassnett states that her assertion made in 1993 that comparative literature was in its death throes was clearly misplaced. The argument made in 1993 that comparative literature was incapable of intellectually and ideologically overcoming the legacy of positivism and post-colonialism was here rejected by Bassnett herself. Her admission adds weight to criticisms made by others that claimed Bassnett’s assertions about the future ascendancy of translation studies were “astonishingly biased”. This statement made in the book ‘Comparative Literature:

A Critical Introduction’ is a classic example of what has been termed as a biased approach to the subject by Bassnett. She claimed that “we should look upon translation studies as the principle discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area”. In 2006, Bassnett accepted that

this “was a deliberately provocative statement, and was as much about trying to raise the profile of translation studies as it was about declaring comparative literature to be defunct”. The arguments of those such as Loffredo, similar to the arguments earlier put forward by Bassnett, claiming that “translation studies really has come of age as an academic discipline” seemed misplaced, or at least in relation to the continued importance of comparative literature. “Today, looking back at that proposition, it appears fundamentally flawed: translation studies has not developed very far at all over three decades and comparison remains at the heart of much translation studies scholarship”. It is clear, therefore, that even in the eyes of Bassnett her earlier argument made in 1993 was no longer defensible. Her admissions in 2006 reflect a clear unease about how to define the concept of comparative literature and she states that “I have been struggling with Comparative Literature all my academic life” and that I have referred to comparative literature as a subject, as a discipline, as a field of study, uncertain which terminology to choose. This uncertainty reflects the uncertainty of comparative literature itself”. These admissions echo criticisms made of Bassnett’s argument above and show that her earlier assertions proceeded from a clear misunderstanding of the concept of comparative literature itself. It is clear, therefore, that even Susan Bassnett no longer accepts the fundamental tenets of the argument that translation studies would replace comparative literature.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this essay has clearly shown Susan Bassnett’s argument that comparative literature would be replaced by translation studies cannot withstand critical scrutiny. This is not to say that her contributions to the field of translation studies are not important, but rather that this particular argument cannot be substantiated. It is clear that the prominence of Bassnett’s argument itself helped to elevate the discipline to a large extent and this was clearly the underlying purpose when she presented her case in 1993. “I argued that perhaps the time had come for a more self-confident discipline, the emergent discipline of translation studies to take centre stage”. Bassnett’s quest to imbibe the discipline with greater self-confidence and place it on an equal footing with related disciplines such as comparative literature was not a problem in its self and most scholars would have accepted this argument. However,

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the problems for Bassnett's claim arose with the incendiary remarks that ran alongside her view that translation studies ought to receive greater recognition. Claims such as "we should look upon translation studies as the principle discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area" have been comprehensively rebuked by critics and this essay has shown that such rebuttals employ sound reasoning. The criticisms made by other scholars are damning and have undermined Bassnett's original argument to a large extent. The criticism made by Saussy that Bassnett's argument proceeded from a clear misunderstanding of the concept of comparative literature in both theory and practice is clearly valid. She argues that Bassnett has simply raised a number of old questions and repackaged them in order to raise the profile of translation studies. This would have been a highly problematic project in itself, if it had not been compounded by a complete lack of clarity concerning the discipline that translation studies was meant to replace.

However, this was by no means the only criticism that undermined the case of Bassnett's arguments. Shaffer argued that the questions that were raised by Bassnett were simply not serious enough to warrant the claim that comparative literature could be replaced by translation studies. In addition, to this she argued that Bassnett was clearly biased in attempting to establish translation studies above comparative literature and that this subjective motivation clearly undermined the quality and validity of her argument. However, by far the most damning indictment of Bassnett's argument that translation studies would replace comparative literature were made by Bassnett herself in 2006. In the course of the article published in 2006, Bassnett effectively endorses the criticisms of her argument outlined above and completely changes her view on the relationship between translation studies and comparative literature. Instead of proclaiming the death of comparative literature, Bassnett now stated that the discipline had a clear future. "The future of comparative literature lies in jettisoning attempts to define the object of study in any prescriptive way and in focussing instead on the idea of literature, understood in the broadest possible sense, and in recognising the inevitable interconnectedness that comes from literary transfer". This constituted a wholesale change of view and fundamentally undermines an argument that would otherwise probably

have been unsustainable even without Bassnett's personal interjection. Bassnett's recognition of the validity of the criticisms made against her argument and her refusal to rebut them fatally undermines her argument and in 2006 she completely rejected all its fundamental tenets. It is clear, that even without Bassnett's admissions this essay would have concluded that her argument was indefensible, but given her own critical assessment of the argument one is forced to conclude that the claim that comparative literature will be replaced by translation studies is clearly unsustainable.

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