

Is there a Feminist Way of Studying Translation? Gender, Translation, Language and Identity Politics

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Translation is often considered a cultural transformation from one language to another. It is indeed a creative work, a recreation or a 'reproduction'. The disciplines like Translation Studies, Gender Studies and Cultural Studies are interdisciplinary and researches have been conducted under these approaches. These approaches deal with the notions of gender and culture at large. Gender and culture are socially-constructed phenomena which determine the social identity of an individual. Translations intend to transfer these notions from one culture to another without losing the essence of the previous. Translators are often men who translate as history has shown us. In translation therefore, male translators are of great eminence which arises certain questions: is there any woman translator and their history, have gender-issues historically been neglected or recognized, did different cultural contexts affect gender-conscious awareness in translation, how does gender-conscious translation affect the target texts and the reception of a translated texts and how the identities of the translator and author is politicized? The present paper intends to problematize them. It will simultaneously show how identity is constructed through the politics of language which itself politicises the identities. These aspects would be explored in the light of the views of Sherry Simon, Luise von Flotow and Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak specifically. In other sense, the present paper is more of a critique of Sherry Simon's ideas supported by von Flotow and Spivak, enlightening the readers of the possibilities of feminist perspective to translation.

Keywords: identity politics, gender, language and translation.

Introduction

Translation Studies and Gender Studies have recently found their platform in the past thirty or forty years. Since 1980s there have been certain developments that have led to the rise of 'the cultural turn'; this addition of culture has rendered a significant dimension to translation (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990). It has shifted the emphasis from how and what to be translated to what do translations do, how do translations affect the literary world and its reception in society. Simon cites Nicole Vard Jouve who has asserted that translation occupies a "(culturally speaking) female position"

(Simon 1996: 01). The conventional view of translation refers to the 'active original' and 'passive translation'; thus the creation is through passive transformation. Men and women occupy the similar active and passive roles in society as well as their sexualities. The notions of beauty and fidelity are associated with females and so with the translation which is not to be beautiful only but must be faithful to the original.

Writing and translation are however interdependent, each adheres to the other. Therefore, the original cannot be considered the real one but a translation of whatever is present in a society that is culture. As the arrival of deconstruction and post-structuralism has aroused the plurality of meaning; and therefore there is no 'single speaking subject'. Translation therefore becomes quite difficult giving rise to the politics of identity, i.e. identity of the writer, the translator and the characters. Gender is constructed through language which intends to monopolise the weaker; women are supposed to be the weaker because of their attributes of submissiveness and humility determined through language. Language therefore has played a vital role in the subjugation of women from the religious scriptures to the conduct books. So what if a translator is a woman translating the text which is framed under the 'patriarchal' language. Here comes into being the politics of language which looks for the feminine way of writing and reading. Before getting into this idea, let us see whether there is any history of female translators or feminist theory of translation. Feminist translators came to the surface concealing their intentions to analyze their oppression through language. They not only castigated the 'phallogocentric' language but advocated for the emergence of a language which will serve as an antonym to 'phallogocentrism' and which could be called 'gynocentric' redefining and modifying existing vocabulary along with the peculiarities of parenthesis, gaps, silences, denoting their own condition through language.

Translatress: The 'lost' Women on the Surface

Renaissance refers to the birth of literature, a revival of learning. During this period, we see the exchange of various cultural transformations through Greek and Latin manuscripts; for such transformation translation came into existence, introducing it to the English speaking world. Sherry Simon has used the term 'translatress' suggesting the presence of female translators during renaissance. Sixteenth century has witnessed many women translators; Margaret Hannay's edited *Silent but For the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators and Writers of Religious Works* (1985) is a collection of essays which inserted personal and political topics subverting texts through translations. These female translators were 'lost' as they were neglected or overlooked. Researchers now have worked on discovering those 'lost' women's knowledge. The anthology, *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823* (Kadish et al. 1994) discusses the works of eighteenth and early nineteenth century French women. Olympe de Gouges, Germaine de Stael and Claire de Duras have been translated and

located in their historical and cultural contexts. It deals with the issues of gender and race questioning the place of writers and translators. There have been abolitionist writings which helped to pave path for the anti-slavery movement. *Women Writing in India (two volumes)* has been edited by Tharu and Lalita (1993); it attempts to rediscover the forgotten texts. Its second volume pays attention to language restoring the forgotten voices from the Indian vernacular languages. There have been a number of translators who have been translating from sixteenth century to nineteenth century; among them, Margaret Fuller, Aphra Behn, Margaret More Roper, Mary Sydney and Margaret Tyler are the eminent ones. Aphra Behn is considered the prominent translator; her novel *Oroonoko* itself has been translated in many languages. Susanna Dobson, Mary Arundell, Lucy Hutchinson and Elizabeth Carter have also translated immensely. Women began translating the Bible as they were allowed to translate religious works written by men. Elizabeth Cay Staton's *The Woman's Bible* (1972) is the best example of it. Bible translation led to the emergence of the 'inclusive language' which ignore the sexist language. However it could not check feminist's contention of subjugation that was led by the patriarchal or phallogocentric language. There have been many research works conducted on these 'lost' women and it is hard to bring all of them into these pages. Therefore, now I will progress to discuss how language, body and gender came to dominate female translators.

Language Politics in Translation

Language is a site of 'contested meanings', an arena where subjects test and prove themselves (Simon 1996: 07). Despite being a means of communication, language is referred as a 'manipulative tool'. This aspect can be understood through the language-centered feminist writers like Helene Cixous, Claudine Hermann, Mariana Yaguello in France, Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, Madeleine Gagnon and France Theoret in Quebec; and Mary Daly, Kate Millett, Andriene Rich in USA. These radical writers viewed language as an instrument in women's oppression; they explore how the consciousness of men and women are created and how gender differences are created through language. They equally delineate how language issues work in power struggle and how power is enhanced through language. In terms of gender and translation they began to rewrite and translate the existing dictionaries and other referential materials. Mary Daly analyses the obsolete words for women's activities and coins the neologies. She analyses the negative connotations of the words like 'hag', 'crone' and 'spinster'. She invents the splitting words like therapists as 'the/rapists' and so on.

Feminism could widely spread throughout the world just due to translation which transferred the movement from one country to the other. French feminism began it and from here it reached USA and then England. The women's movement led women to think of the liberation from the patriarchal language and "*La liberation des femmes passé par le langage*". It is of the view that at first women must be liberated from phallogocentric language.

Bersianik returns to phallogentrism of the language from two aspects: naming strategies and grammatical gender-marking. Now what if a male translator translates a female text; Bersianik takes the translation of her French novel *Eugelionne* by Howard Scott. He says that his only duty as a translator is merely to provide an equivalent rather than introducing sexism in French language. He emphasizes the female identity of the guilty when he translates the lines: “Le ou la coupable doit etre punie” as “The guilty must be punished... whether she’s a man or a woman!” This is what to be called the politics of language in the formation of identity and gender.

Le deuxieme written by Simone de Beauvoirr is considered the ‘feminist bible’; it advanced gender-conscious translation criticism. It was first published in French in 1949 and was translated by the American professor Howard Parshley in English in 1952 as *The Second Sex*. It was critically accepted by the readers and scholars. Criticism was based on the unmarked deletion of more than ten percent of the book. The section containing names and achievements of historical women has been deleted in the English version. Margaret Simons (1983) says that names of seventy eight women have been along with the ascription of such cultural taboos as lesbian relationships (Flotow 1997: 50). As a male translator, he puts his own identity first and he comes to the writer later, eliminating most of significant part of the text.

The feminist translators challenge the notion of grammatical gender-consciousness. In the opinion of Deborah Cameron, a feminist linguist, the term gender is attributed to Protagoras and it refers to the division of the Greek nouns into masculine, feminine and neuter. It implies that under grammatical gender the nouns are placed according to their form; and this form determines how the word will behave in agreement to adjectives, articles and pronouns which will generate the gender-conscious identity. It is argued that gender cannot be an element of language for translation as grammatical categories belong to structural language. But Roman Jakobson is of the view that grammatical gender can be invested with meaning when it is to analyze poetry and mythology. He emphasizes the mythological origins and gendered identities of the terms for the days of the week, day and night or sin and death. Therefore feminist translators followed Jakobson in reinvesting gender markers with meaning (Simon 1996: 17). Howard Scott and Susanna de Lotbiniere-Harwood focus on grammatical gender. Simon says that de Lotbiniere-Harwood’s translation of Nicole Brossard’s *Le Desert mauve* unravels the expressions of gender-marking. She responds to Brossard’s gender-markings with the invention of her own. Simon cites her words:

My translation spells “author”, ‘auther’ as a way of rendering the feminized auteure pioneered and widely used by Quebec feminists; and “renders the beautiful amante, lesbian lover, by “shelove”. To further eroticize the foreign tongue, “dawn”, a feminine noun in French is referred as “she” in the sentence: . . . , these feminization

strategies make it possible for target-language readers to identify the lesbian in the text (de Lotbiniere-Harwood's words in Sherry Simon).

Language of the source text can be modified and re-invented by the feminist translators according to their own emphasis on gender denoting meaning. Translation is thus not a simple transfer but the continuation of a process of meaning creation, the circulation of meaning within a contingent network of texts and social discourses. The writings of Cixous, Irigaray and to a certain extent Kristeva are "language-centered". Irigaray uses philosophical concepts like enigmatic, parodic, visionar, prophetic, academic, in order to adapt to different projects. She introduces neologism such as "sexuation" and renders new meaning to the existing words by replacing certain letters. She changes Levinas's term (during translation) *l'aimee* to her *l'amante*, restoring woman as a desiring subject (Simon 1996: 100). *This Sex Which Is Not One* is her chief text and here she talks about the politicized language under the control of power structure already suggested by Cixous. Kristeva is a psychoanalyst but a close reading of her essay, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature an Art*, reveals her concerns for language too in order to give voice to female sexuality. The translation of the term *jouissance* has been discussed in detail. She relates female 'sensual, sexual pleasure' to *plisir* while refers to 'joy or ecstasy'; and it can go beyond its meaning through the working of signifier.

Helene Cixous advocates for *écriture féminine*, a language specifically for females. She is considered, according to Nicole Ward Jouve, the highly misinterpreted French feminist. "Le rire de la Medusa" published in translation as "The Laugh of Medusa" in *Signs* (1976) is a seminal article where she enunciates her views on the possibility gender based language for females. Her views are a bit complex as she refers to the multiplicity of language in which she was born and which led her to conclude that there is no definite language; therefore meaning of one language to another language. She urges us to master language and embrace the plurality of language and its differences. Her *Vivre l'orange* (1979) is a bilingual text. Her translation is 'consistent and coherent'; in English she renders a very deep echo of the French text. In every language there is a 'plurality of codes'; by asserting this she attempts to bring out the 'tensions among identities'. Therefore the speaker's identity is postponed as of writer, translator and even of language itself. Here the politics of language comes to fore. Such feminist thinkers created a community of readers for their literary and linguistic experiments. It is Nicole Brossard from Quebec who employed this approach in her writing. Her works not only dismantle the power invested in patriarchal language but also creates women's utopia (Flotow 1997: 11).

Identity Politics, Spivak and Translation

Women's representation 'in language, through language and across language' has problematized the very identity of their being. Gender instability therefore has added a new dimension in the discussions taking place under the disciplines of Translation Studies and Cultural Studies. The globalization of culture has led to the multiplicity of identities as well as cultural differences. The translational communication and frequent migrations have problematized the contemporary world. The hybridization of diasporic culture has led to the emergence of mobility of identities; Cultural Studies brings this into considerations along with gender identities. In the words of Sherry Simon:

Women "translate themselves" into the language of patriarchy, migrants strive to "translate" their past into present. Translation as a tangible representation of a secondary or mediated relationship or reality, has come to stand for the difficulty of access to language, of a sense of exclusion from the codes of the powerful (Sherry Simon 1996: 127).

When culture is referred in terms of gender and translation, the postcolonial critics, Homi Bhabha and Spivak are of greater significance. While translation, the identities of the translator, writer (of migrants too) and characters come into play which leads to tensions and confusions. These altered identities of translation have destabilized the cultural identities. Culture and cultural studies have deeply influenced the works and theories of the writers including Bhabha and Spivak. Cultural Studies probes the complexities of gender and cultural identities in translation. Translators are expected to understand the culture of the source text which is itself a translation of the existing ideas and cultural exchanges. As it closely associated with its own cultural conventions it is quite difficult to convert one culture into the culture of other language. Hereby cultural meaning cannot be brought out in another language as it is. Language of one text carries its own cultural implications; it is difficult to transfer one language into another along with its cultural meaning because each language carries its own cultural identity. Therefore a translator should be concerned with the reconstruction of the value of one text rather than finding its equivalents. 'Cultural contention' helps translation generate meanings which are itself unstable due to its constant shifting and changing scenario.

Feminist translators and translations equally help us understand the cultural meanings behind the construction of their identities. They foreground the cultural significance of women by emphasizing role of gender in language and the role of subjectivity in reclamation of meaning. Cultural identity has itself gone through three phases: (1) an essentialist phase, claiming existence of women's reality opposing patriarchy; (2) a constructionist model, differences due to historical positioning; (3) differences are produced dialogically based on Derridean "*difference*" and Foucauldian knowledge as a

performative category; plurality of differences prioritizes the concept of localization. Sexual differences and representational cultural practices are central to the production of the subjects generating identities.

In order to understand the duality of gender and cultural identity in terms of translation, the theorist Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak can be taken into consideration at first. Her seminal essay "The Politics of Translation" deals with the intersection of gender and culture in translation. At first, she counsels translators to take language as a 'clue' in the formation of gendered identity; it leads to the 'analysis of the 'rhetoricity of language.' In the beginning, the translators must 'surrender' to the text which leads them towards the issues of subjective investment and loss in knowledge (Spivak 1993). She is of the view that there must be an engagement between translator (as an agent of language) and textuality, emphasizing the conditions of meaning along with the ideas created in the text. She explores the relationship between self and other enacted through translation. She talks of two aspects in translation: the erotic and the ethical. The 'ethical' implies that it has to be 'self', it should be similar to the source text; while in translation we find 'irreducibility of the otherness' which leads to erotic side. This erotic side can be understood in the light of George Steiner's 'hermeneutic motion'. Using the male imagery, he describes the act of penetration of text through which the 'translator invades, extracts, and brings home.' His stages of imagery begin with a passive movement but end up with a gesture of control (Simon 1996: 136).

Spivak describes her act of translation in this way: at first the translator must surrender themselves to the source text, and then they must move towards language showing its limits as its very rhetorical aspect will expose the silences within language. It would show the hidden confusions and tensions prevailing in the text. She recognizes the need for translation completely grounded in feminist solidarity; as cultural inequalities have been created by the First World feminists which must be paid attention. For instance, Goethe wishes his readers understand his ideal of a world literature as the 'prefiguration of a harmonious universe of exchange' or a 'form of cultural dissensus and alterity' (Bhabha 1994). Spivak echoes him in her suggestion of the translation of the Third World literature into English. In the words of Sherry Simon, "Translation can attain the democratic ideal only if the rhetoricity and textuality of the work of the Third World women is equally rendered." Spivak emphasizes on the learning of the work of other language, she says that if a person intends to learn other culture why can't (s)he learn the intended language too. By this suggestion, she enters the reach of postcolonial inequalities and how they are reproduced in academic feminism and cultural studies. She thus draws attention to the power of language of translation in terms of its poor linguistic and aesthetic assimilation; and how it affects the constructed identities.

Illustration through Spivak's Translation of Bengali Texts

Spivak says that translator must be aware of the resistant and conformist writings by women. She establishes her opinions with the help of her own translation of Bengali texts. In first of her Mahashweta Devi's short story, she neglects Bengali proverb which would have been "The Wet Nurse" and uses "The Breast Giver" to emphasize its Marxian and Freudian associations. The preface of the volume, *Imaginary Maps*, describes the conversation between her and the writer along with her own intention of the contextualization of all the voices in her translation: the voices of the tribals of India, of Devi and of Spivak herself. In her translation, all these three identities are given equal importance. She addresses her double audience. She gives "chic", "bad news", "what a dish", "blow him away", in terms of familiar vernacular language. Like Spivak's, they make swift leaps between different vocabulary registers. The English terms appeared in the original Bengali text are italicized in English in order to retain the 'legacy of colonial English in Bengali vernacular' (Simon 1996: 140). She reads her story, "Doulati", from three different perspectives, i.e. Marxism, deconstruction, feminism. Through her translation, she attempts to sensitize the readers of two things: internal differences of postcolonial nation; and appreciation of the singular nature of the cultural forms produced by Third World. Spivak thereby proves to be one of the prominent theorists who consider language a significant 'condition' for understanding singular cultural forms. Spivak along with Homi K. Bhabha defines translation as 'a difficult and a never-ending transaction between the uncertain poles of cultural difference' (Simon 1996: 156).

Conclusion

Translation thus can be seen as closely associated with the terms gender and cultural differences. It also implies that the politics of language leads to the construction of gendered-conscious identities. Cultural identity and gender identity have equal affects on translation of the source text. Feminist translators at first took the notion of language politics and language mobility in order to show how they help creating gender-conscious awareness. It also shows how translations provided a platform for women to enter the writing world, however translating the religious texts written by male writers. All these opinions are discussed in the light of the opinions of Simon and von Flotow. Spivak's theories regarding the politics of translation are discussed and how she encourages feminist translators to render multiplicity of identities in their translations. There are feminist translators who made the feminist translations possible. They provided a feminist element in the translation with the help of language and identity politics. But the question arises whether there will be a separate place for female translators and is it fruitful to highlight the gender-conscious awareness in the translation.

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