Module 7: Translation and Gender

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1.1 Gender, Identity and Translation

> One is not born, but rather one becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as the feminine.
>
> (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* p. 295)

In her path-breaking book *Gender in Translation* (1996), Sherry Simon views the synchronous growth of the disciplines of Gender Studies and Translation Studies in eighties and nineties of twentieth century as a phenomenon indicative of the their fundamental preoccupation with identity and language. As the above-mentioned quotation reflects, gender is essentially a socio-cultural construct; a process of injecting into a girl all those physical, psychological and social traits that necessarily differentiate her from a boy / man. As we have seen earlier, "cultural turn" in translation studies also looks upon translations as products of cultural representation. Thus both gender and translation are imparted a certain identity through an ideologically-governed process of cultural mediation. Both these disciplines lay immense stress on the way language plays a decisive role in shaping of identities. Sherry Simon rightly points out, "Translation studies have been impelled by many of the concerns central to feminism: the distrust of traditional hierarchies and gendered roles, deep suspicion of rules defining fidelity, and the questioning of universal standards of meaning and value. Both feminism and translation are concerned by the way "secondariness" comes to be defined and canonized; both are tools for a critical understanding of difference as it is represented in language." (1996, p.8) For Simon, the function of a translation function is to recognize and punctuate differences and that of a translator to figure out how these historical, social and sexual differences get articulated and transmitted through language. A feminist translator would rather try to use language as an object of cultural intervention to subvert the hierarchies of domination and oppression in society than strive to accomplish textual fluency and invisibility because in translation boundaries between self and community are blurred. The agency of feminist translator exploits the semantic and syntactical potential of language to alter the terms of domination for the feminine class as a whole.

At this juncture, it is to be borne in mind that it is not always the gendered identity of the translator that affects the way textual representations are constructed but more often than not it is the project or ideology espoused and promoted by the translator that guides his/her politics of translation. For a feminist translator this ideology is feminism. The project of feminism has enabled translators to interrogate the male-dominated literary spaces and norms of literary aesthetics and further locate texts by women writers that were excluded from literary history on the grounds of being alternative and different. One of the major tasks of the feminist translator in the twenty-first century is to recover these excluded and ostracized literary spaces through translation and provide them their rightful places in the literary and cultural histories of nations. Tharu and Lalita's *Women Writing in India* (1991), Kadish and Massardier-Kenney's *Translating Slavery. Gender and Race in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823* (1994), Diane Rayor's *Sappho's Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece* (1991) are a few noteworthy efforts in this direction.

1.2 Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation

Much of the translation theory that we have is heavily sexualized and reflects extreme gender bias in describing the entities of source text and translated text, writer and translator. As we have already seen, from the 17th century onwards, translation theory has been obsessed with the problematic issues of fidelity and inferiority of translation to the original text. This overarching preoccupation with the idea of originality and imitation, production and reproduction has led to the usage of numerous metaphors by theorists that link translation with gender and sexuality. In her insightful article "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation", Lori Chamberlain undertakes a scholarly survey of the history of gender metaphors in translation theory in West.

The sexualisation of translation theory was overtly articulated by 17th century French rhetorician Ménage whose famous adage "Les belles infidels" likened translation to a women who could either be faithful or beautiful. This adage sites fidelity as an implicit contract between translation/woman and original/husband/father/author. "Its success is due in some measure to the way it positions fidelity as the opposite of beauty, ethics as the opposite of elegance, the drudgery of moral obligation as incompatible with stylistic (or marital) felicity." (Simon, 1996) However, the characteristic patriarchal double standards operate here as well. Chamberlain points out that in French the word *traduction* is a feminine word which makes a construction like *les beaux infideles* impossible to formulate**.** Thus, it always the woman / translation who is implicated for the crimes of infidelity / transgression / difference and her male counterpart can readily gallivant with impunity. "Such an attitude betrays real anxiety about the problem of paternity and translation; it mimics the patrilineal kinship system where paternity-not maternity- legitimizes an offspring." (Chamberlain, 1992)

Such a binary opposition along the axis of production and reproduction can be traced to Western civilization in which ideas of creativity and originality are essentially ascribed to males and the female figure is given secondary, subordinate functions. Lori Chamberlain explains this as a way of maintaining power relations and already-established borders: "What proclaims itself to be an aesthetic problem is represented in terms of sex, family and the state, and what is consistently at issue is power…I would argue that the reason translation is so overcoded, so overregulated is that it threatens to erase the difference between production and reproduction which is essential to the establishment of power" (Chamberlain 1992).

The trope of paternity is seen as extended further by 17th century earl of Roscommon who advises the translator to usurp the role of the author/male himself so as to protect the chastity of the text/young girl. In a dramatic reversal of gender roles, in the hands of 18th century theorist Thomas Francklin, the translator is seen as a male

seducer of text/mistress. As female sexuality was considered passive, the image was immediately transferred to translation, which supposes an active original, and a passive translation, active creation followed by passive transmission. Then there are metaphors for translation with implications of violence towards women resulting from (colonial) conquest. Chamberlain gives the example of Thomas Drant's theorization of translation as a backdrop to execute his translation of Homer. Grant likens translation of a foreign text to a captive woman who needs to be properly treated before accepting her as a wife by the master. Her nails should be pared, her properly head shaved and she should be kept in isolation for a due period of time. What is worst is that after all these purification rites, if the master is not satisfied with her performance and efficiency she can be abandoned for other captors. "It should by now be obvious that this metaphorics of translation reveals both an anxiety about the myths of paternity (or authorship and authority) and a profound ambivalence about the role of maternity-ranging from the condemnation of les belles infideles to the adulation accorded to the "mother tongue." (Chamberlain, 1992) Even 20th century metaphors are not free of violence. In his essay, "The Translator: From Piety to Cannibalism," Serge Gavronsky, in spite of his well-meaning efforts to free the translator/ translation from the signs of cultural secondariness, falls a prey to the same metaphoric terminology that swayed the earlier theory. He divides translation metaphors into two groups: pietistic and cannibalistic. The pietistic metaphors blend the courtly and Christian traditions, looking upon translator as a knight / Christian pledging fidelity to the unravished lady / the Virgin. In the cannibalistic group, translator devours the source text/writer completely and thenre-articulates it/him in his own terms. As one notices in these metaphors, the translator, is a male who repeats on the sexual level the kinds of crimes any colonizing country commits on its colonies. (Chamberlain, 1992)

1.3 Re-envisioning Fidelity : Post-Structuralist Discourse

The cultural turn in translation has undermined the notion of a fixed meaning of a text which is transferred to a different text quite passively by a translator. In conventional theory, ""The translator is understood to be a servant, an invisible hand mechanically turning the word of one language into another" (Godard 1990:91) Contemporary translation theory does away with idea of equivalence and fixity of meanings and identities in translation to valorize the notion of transformation whereby a fluid meaning is created and hierarchies of identities are destabilized in favour of interstices. Translation carries with it the strong sense of changing, transforming, or altering one thing into another and that it is also intimately connected with the act of interpretation. Consequently, out of the five meanings isolated by The Oxford English Dictionary of translation, at least three underscore its explanatory, interpretive and transformative aspects.

Much of the post-structuralist discourse has interrogated, revisited and subverted the polarity of identities on which much of the gender-biased translation theory was based. Julia Kriesteva's formulation of intertextuality problematized the very idea of originality of any text, be it a source text or translation. Where conventional approaches to translation were "unified by a conceptual framework which assumes original presence and a representation of it in the receiving society" (Gentzler, 1993), deconstruction shifted attention away from the interlinear to the transformational elements of translation by raising a series of questions about both presence and representation in translation. Derrida (1981) questioned the absolute position that a literary text occupied in the traditional critical discourse and argues that each new instance of reading text is a different occasion to experience the absence of its meaning. Deconstruction shifted the attention from identity to difference, from the notion of a "real" meaning as as sited within a text to meaning that result from the differential play within a system of signification. Derrida thus imparted unprecedented primacy to translation bestowing upon it the status of literature since a translator, like a creative writer, signified meaning as independent presence. Derrida's project

has been to subvert "the very concept of difference which produces the binary opposition between an original and its reproduction-and finally to make this difference undecidable. By drawing many of his terms from the lexicon of sexual difference-dissemination, invagination, hymen- Derrida exposes gender as a conceptual framework for definitions of mimesis and fidelity, definitions central to the "classical" way of viewing translation." (Chamberlain, 1992) Pointing out the double bind of translation through the metaphor of hymen, Derrida avers that translation is both original and secondary, uncontaminated and transgressive. In his characteristic style, he portrays the interdependence of original and translation to show that neither is superior to the other. However, Chamberlain points out Derrida's inability to account for the historical-cultural contexts that govern the problematic of translation by citing historical periods in which women could indulge in translation activity just because it was considered secondary, derivative and feminine.

1.4 Feminist Translation

Feminist translation theory locates the act of translation in its historical-cultural contexts and describes the role of feminist ideology in decision-making and the overall way in which translations come into being. Feminist writing and feminist translation share a desire to foreground female subjectivity in the way texts are interpreted and translated. In this regard, Barbara Godard pertinently remarks, "The feminist translator, affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text." (Godard, 91). She conceives an avant-garde formulation of *Womanhandling* the source text in translation which allows for pro-active intervention in the process of transmission and representation of meaning in consonance with feminist agenda. Such a radical position in translation theory has completely rejected the conventional notions of transparency of translated text and invisibility of translator.

1.4.1 Visibility of a Translator

Eminent translator Lawrence Venuti (1986) has talked at length about what he calls the invisibility of translation in Anglo-American context to signify the paramountcy of the norm of fluency and unhindered readability of the translation. He says that in the first world, the entry of the translated other is flagged on the condition that the other becomes the mirror to reflect the self-image of the target culture. Anglo-American readership, academia and publishers are uncomfortable with translations that exhibit the signs of foreign cultures, communities or poetics and resultantly denigrate such translations as 'translationese'. They believe that translation should read like a source text in its own right which is a euphemism to say it should be cast completely in the literary and cultural matrix of the target language. Venuti here differentiates between two models of translation (1) Domesticating Model (2) Foreignizing Model. According to the first, the translator like husband / master domesticates the source text like a woman or a slave to realize the interests of the target literary aesthetics and culture. We have seen examples of this model in earlier module on post-colonial translation. On the other hand, foreignizing model reserves the right of individuality and difference of the source text in translation.

Feminist translation theorists like Godard and Carol Maier espouse the foreinizing model with a vengeance. For them, translation is a tool to shore up interests and identity of women in literature and society at large and it can be accomplished only with ideological manipulation as well as positioning of the original through extensive paratextual devices. "These include academic essays contextualizing the source texts, annotations, translator/author bio-bibliographies, which make no difference between the importance of the author's and translator's respective contributions, proliferating prefaces, political affiliations, sexual orientations and ethnic background as aspects of the translator-effect.." (Zaharia,

) Feminist translations are unequivocally subjective exercises in as much as they register translator's individuality and identity through repeated mentioning of herself, her gender, her predilections, her ideological underpinnings, formative influences and her politics. Such an attitude becomes manifest in Diane Rayor's translations of archaic Greek women poets. In the introduction, she avers, "… the translations here reflect my individual response to ancient poetry. My response is informed by my knowledge of Greek and of the historical context of the poetry. My gender, my background in contemporary American culture, and my personal enjoyment of contemporary American poetry also influence that response." (cited in von Flotow 1997:38)

1.4.2 Womanhandling Misogyny

At times, the act of translation becomes extremely problematic for the feminist translator especially when the source text is misogynist in nature. Carol Maier and Suzanne Jill Levine have talked at length about the difficulty of reconciling their feminist agenda with overtly denigrating content of source text and the strategies to be used to counter such aspersions. This is applicable not only to feminist translators but also to black translators and in Indian context to Dalit translators. When faced with abusive material in the source text, the Dalit translator has to assert his/her ideological ethics to mediate casteist outlook of the source text.

Levine describes her experience of translating Guillermo Cabrera Infante's extremely chauvinistic work which otherised and degraded women through images of the lover-whore, the devoted and unsexed mother and the virgin. He portrayed women as objects of fear and distrust. While translating such an opinionated text, Levine chose to deconstruct the stereotypes, temper authorial misogyny with the woman's inherent strength of character and neutralizes the biased language. The feminist theory of translation does not recommend abstinence from approaching patriarchal texts, but in fact encourages translators to approach such text with a will to subvert the lop-sided masculine discourse and reclaim spaces for female agency.

1.4.3 Strategies of a Feminist Translator

Finally, both feminist writers and translators emphasize the importance adapt the language to suit the expression of feminine experience. They make a conscious effort to subvert and re-form the language that has been sustained by institutions of patriarchal hegemony like school, universities and the media industry. They make a call for experimentation with and transformation of this language to impart it a feminine hue and texture. Von Flotow has mentioned three major strategies of feminist translation which can shore up feminist agenda to a maximum degree.

(1) Supplementing
(2) Prefacing and footnoting
(3) Hijacking (cited in Simon, 1996).

Supplementing refers to a conscious act of making amends for the fundamental differences between languages. It concerns creative reproduction of wordplay, images and symbolism as per the ideological leanings. Prefacing and footnoting refers to contextualization of a text, spelling out of authorial as well as translator's positions and bringing out the cultural contexts and archetypes etc. through a variety of paratextual devices. Finally, "hijacking" signifies "the appropriation of a text whose intentions are not necessarily feminist by the feminist translator." (Simon 1996, p.15) In case of such an appropriation, the author and translator work in close collaboration to reconfigure the language of the original, thus freezing the idea of ownership and authority of the translated text.

References :

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Venuti, Lawrence (1986) "A Translator's Invisibility" *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and Arts* 28.2: 179-212.

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Assignments:

1. How does preoccupation with culture and identity bind translation studies and gender studies together? Make a historical survey of the growth of these two disciplines.
2. In what ways can you make your mother-tongue gender-sensitive while translating a foreign feminist text? Select an argumentative essay and translate it in your mother-tongue to see what strategies work and don't work towards such sensitization.