Criticisms of Feminist Translation Theory from within Feminism

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Abstract. Feminist translation theory has enlarged the boundaries of translation studies and triggered an unprecedented revolution in translation concepts and thoughts. This theory denies the traditional notions of translation as reproduction, arguing that translation is cultural interference and coordination during which there are creations of new meanings; it denies the traditional hierarchical concept of the superiority of the original and the subordination of the translation, redefining their relationship as coexistence; it also denies the absoluteness of meaning and emphasizes its richness and diversity, herein reinterpreting fidelity and accentuating infidelity or treason in translation. In general, it is a unique penetration in translation perspectives, practices and strategies. However, it also receives much criticisms in translation circles. This thesis aims to explore the criticisms from those within feminism. Throughout this thesis, the descriptive and qualitative approaches are adopted.

Introduction

The combination of feminism with translation studies has led to the emergence of feminist translation theory. It emphasizes the translator’s visibility and subjectivity. On one hand, feminists bring the aspect of “gender” into translation theories and broaden the studies of the translator’s subjectivity. On the other hand, they claim that translation is rewriting, which offers an opportunity to fight against textual pallogocentrism and sexual discrimination so as to make the feminine visible in texts and influence women’s identity in the real life. Rewriting is a kind of manipulation serving as a tool for power and may be helpful to the evolution of literature and society. Rewriting means the acknowledgement of the translator’s creativity or subjectivity. However, feminists’ over-emphasis on the translator’s subjectivity, to some extent, has imposed negative challenges upon translation theories and practices. The biggest challenge may be the question of what translation is. Thus feminist translation theory inevitably encounters all kinds of criticisms from outside feminism and within feminism. This thesis just focuses on those criticisms that come from within the widening boundaries of feminism and support the view that gender makes a critical difference.

Criticisms from within Feminism

Self-contradiction in Feminist Translation Theory

Feminist translation theory, to some extent, has self-contradiction. Based on the statements translators and academics have published in essays and translation prefaces, the Brazilian critic Rosemary Arrojo applies three harsh terms: “opportunism”, “hypocrisy” and “theoretical incoherence” to feminist activism and interventionism in translation [1]. She does not discuss actual translations. Instead, she makes comments on the context that feminists “are so bravely fighting to construct” and on their “much deserved space within the prevailing, phallogocentric world of men,” phrases that express a distinct distance to the political activism and agency of the Anglo-American women’s movement [1].

Opportunism. Arrojo says that it is opportunistic to claim to be faithful to the tenor of a text and yet admit deliberately intervening in the translation for feminist reasons. In Arrojo’s eyes, feminists
like Levine and Harwood are merely exploiting the context that feminist theory and praxis have created; they are trying to make their own politics count. It is contradictory to claim “fidelity” to a text one deliberately subverts.

**Hypocrisy.** Rosemary Arrojo claims that it is hypocritical for feminists to adopt double standard to treat its own theory and other translation theories. Feminists describe as violent and aggressive the theories produced by George Steiner or the comments made by John Florio, while refusing to see that feminist intervention in texts is no less aggressive. Hijacking, the translation strategy adopted by feminist translators, also represents feminists’ violence and aggression. As a matter of fact, the idealism of feminist translation appears simply to be a reverse image of masculinist configurations. Arrojo wonders what makes a “feminist translator’s affirmation of her delight in interminable re-reading and rewriting” the text something positive and desirable whereas Steiner’s “masculine” model is merely “violent” and “appropriative” [2]. Why is a masculinist interpretive model a betrayal while a feminist one is enriching?

**Theoretical Incoherence.** Arrojo’s third point is the “theoretical incoherence” she sees in feminist discourses on translation. This is located not only in claims about “subversive fidelity,” but is evident in the general references to post-structuralism and deconstructionist work on which feminist critics and translators base some of their ideas. According to Derrida, “no meaning can ever be ‘reproduced’ or ‘recovered’ but is always already created, or recreated, anew” [1]. Arrojo herein asserts that it is theoretically incoherent for feminist writers or translators to claim to “recreate meaning, anew.” This orthodox Derridean view thus cancels out women’s optimistic assumption that they can act upon a text independently. And the forceful, interventionist, creative approaches that have come to define feminist work in translation are a mere mirage; there can be no agency. Furthermore, Arrojo supports the deterministic position that since meaning is always being reconstructed anyway, ideas about being able to intentionally recreate meaning are nothing but self-delusion.

**Elitism in Experimental Feminist Writing and Translation**

Experimental feminist writing has blossomed in every Western European and North American country and in all languages in the early 1970s. It is a kind of writing which “sought to undermine, subvert, even destroy the conventional everyday language maintained by institutions such as schools and universities, publishing houses and the media, dictionaries, writing manuals, and the great works of literature” [1]. In these works, feminist writers have tried out new words, new spellings, new grammatical constructions, new images and metaphors in an attempt to get beyond the conventions of patriarchal language that, in their view, determine to a large extent what women can think and write [1].

However, with its novel language and approach, feminist experimental writing has not escaped charges of elitism since its first appearance. Obviously this writing was not meant for popular consumption but was aimed at an educated readership with some knowledge of the burgeoning feminist movement and the willingness to engage in linguistic work. The so-called “avant-garde” nature of this kind of writing further alienated some of the willing readers for several reasons. First, the artistic avant-garde has been associated with the efforts of more or less decadent young men whose groups excluded or silenced women as effectively as most other groups [1]. Second, work that is labeled avant-garde is seldom seen to have an immediate or concrete socio-political effect, functioning instead in the realm of art and aesthetics, even avoiding the political arena [1]. Many feminists, however, wanted to institute visible and rapid changes in their societies, and experimental writing did not seem to be a very direct way of doing so. Third, the interest that “avant-garde” experimental writing garnered in the academic sphere caused the devaluation or exclusion of other types of writing by women [1].

Rita Felski comments on some of the radicalizing claims made in regard to French feminist experiments:
It is impossible to make a convincing case for the claim that there is anything inherently feminine or feminist in experimental writing as such; if one examines l’écriture féminine, for example, the only gender-specific elements exist on the level of content, as in metaphors of the female body [1].

She argues that experiments in form cannot be described as specifically feminist and that French feminism has overestimated the political effects of language games. The focus on experimental work “limits oppositional culture to the reading and writing experiments of intellectual elite” [1]. On the contrary, she argues in support of writing that reflects the experiences, histories and biographies of women in different parts of the world, in different racial and class groups and at different historical periods [1]. She thinks that this writing is as important as experimental writing since it reflects and promotes feminism as the social movement, and moves it into a more popular public sphere [1].

The opposition that Felski sets up between French feminist experiments and more socio-critical types of expression can certainly be transferred to the translation of experimental work. In translation, the problem is compounded by the fact that when experimental texts are translated, they not only move into other languages but also other cultures, which can make them appear even more exotic and elitist. In 1995 the Canadian Robyn Gillam wrote an article to level charges of elitism and cultural inappropriateness, even meaninglessness, against English translations of the texts by Nicole Brossard. Thus far these translations have generally been read in silent awe at Brossard’s intellectual achievements and the virtuosic linguistic manipulation of the translator, in an atmosphere that evinced uncritical admiration of this challenging literary material [1].

Gillam observes that certain translations have made the already difficult source material even more obscure. They produce versions that seek to extend the already complex wordplay into the English text by privileging sound associations over meaning. For example, Brossard’s text Sous la langue (1987) contains some lines like the following:

Fricatelle ruisselle essentielle aime-t-elle dans le touche à tout qui arrondit les seins la rondeur douce des bouches ou l’effet qui la déshabille [1]?

The word/sound elle at the end of the first four words both reinforces the feminine context of the text and creates the neologisms essentielle and fricatelle. Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, the English translator of Brossard, focuses on the elle endings and finds a way to fit in the pronoun “she.”

Does she frictional she fluvial she essential does she in the all-embracing touch that rounds the breasts love the mouths’ soft roundness or the effect undressing her [1]?

Obviously the original lines and the translation are both puzzling and difficult to understand. Moreover, in order to create these sound effects in English, the translators have deliberately mistranslated. Therefore Gillam suggests that these translations can only be addressed to a small number of academics “who are already bilingual and can marvel at the linguistic accomplishments of both author and translator” [1].

These charges are based on a major point of cultural difference. For example, the English and French-speaking Canadians have inherently different political relationships to their respective languages. For Quebecois, language has always been a political issue of daily life while this is not the case for most English-speaking Canadians. Thus, Brossard’s deconstructive language games mean something different in a text in Quebec than they do in the rest of Canada. Because they derive from and respond to a different linguistic history, they have a different political value. And when Brossard experiments with the gendered aspects of French, thus taking Quebec’s concern with language one political step further, she takes it well beyond the threshold of most English-speaking Canadians [1]. Finally, since this focus on language has little in common with forms of political activism in English-Canadian culture, feminists are “at a loss to translate either Brossard’s texts or her ideas into their own culture” [1]. This is why Godard’s translations focus on the sound of the words rather than their sense and why the translations of French feminisms and écriture québécoise are “reduced to an intellectual game where there exists nothing but words and their meanings” [1]. In 1985, Evelyne Voldeng put forward a similar criticism of such translation. In a review of the English version of Brossard’s l’Amèr, où le chapitre effrité, she attacks the translation for “creating a puzzling ambiguity that only a bilingual reader understands when referring to the source text” [1]. The translation is more
difficult and more confusing than Brossard’s original work, and patently aims at readers who are already bilingual.

It is obvious that this elitist type of translation has presupposed that “readers have an academic background, a bilingual and bicultural understanding of the text as well as an appreciation of linguistic change as a political catalyst” [1].

**Neo-colonialism in Feminist Translation**

This criticism against certain types of feminist work in translation comes from Gayatri Spivak. Of Bengali origin, she is a literary theorist and practicing translator who has published commentaries on western (English and French) translations of Third World literature. In her article “The Politics of Translation,” Spivak formulates extensive criticism of the “with-it-translationese” used for Third World literature and the ideology that makes possible such careless, homogenizing work that “the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan” [3]. In her earlier work Spivak asserts that there is a “ravenous hunger for Third World literary texts (by women) in English translation” [4]. This hunger has been triggered by benevolent liberal feminist interests as well as by the vague desire to remedy radical bias within western feminism. She implies that this benevolent interest may actually do more to serve Anglo-American purposes and careers than it does to propagate understanding of the situations in which many Third World women live, and only few write. The situation is made worse by the fact that Anglo-American feminists seem to want to read Third World literature as documentary and realistic depictions of life, while the “literatures of the First World have graduated into language games” [4]. These two approaches—the “benevolent” will to understand and disseminate Third World women’s cultures and literatures, and the naïve view of Third World literature as realism—heavily influence the translations and misrepresent the works and cultures they claim to speak for [1].

Spivak criticizes that “there is so much of the old colonial attitude, slightly displaced, at work in the translation racket” [3]. Translations are done to comply with the publisher’s convenience, with classroom convenience, and with the “time convenience for people who do not have the time to learn” [4]. Among these people she places translators who have boned up on Third World languages in order to respond to a vogue of interest but who know little about the history of the language, the history of the author’s moment or about what she calls “language-in-and-as-translation.” Spivak argues that literary work never simply imparts information and herein stresses the rhetoricity of language. This is the particular style of the original text that carries considerable meaning within its own cultural and literary context and in relation to it, as well as in relation to western forms of expression. It is what makes any text specific to its author and its cultural context and time, but also reveals individual resistances to the traditions it springs from. When convenient or benevolent translations are made, or when the translator “cannot engage with, or cares insufficiently for, the rhetoricity of the original” [4], then a “neo-colonialist construction of the non-western scene is afoot” [4]. In other words, the following situation exists: easy-reading translations of Third World literary works are produced; the source texts are selected by those relatively uninformed academics who cannot or do not know the difference between good and bad writing by women, between resistant and conformist work, often laboring under the false assumption that anything by women writers will do; this will create a situation in which “democratic” western consciences may be salved, but where, in fact, western laws of force apply [1]. In effect, these translations construct a Third World as well as a Third World literature that correspond to western tastes.

Spivak backs up this criticism with contrastive examples from her own translations and those of others as well as with western interpretations of Indian literary works. For example, Mahasweta Devi’s “Stanadāyini” is available in two versions. Spivak puts forward her version “The Breast-Giver.” The alternative translation gives the title as “The Wet-Nurse” and thus neutralizes the author’s irony in constructing an uncanny world; enough like “wet-nurse” to make that sense, and enough unlike to shock [3]. The theme of treating the breast as organ of labor-power-as-commodity and the breast as metonymic part-object standing in for other-as-object—the way in which the story
plays with Marx and Freud on the occasion of the woman’s body—is lost even before you enter the story [3]. In the text Mahasweta uses proverbs that are startling even in the Bengali language. The translator of “The Wet-Nurse” leaves them out. She decides not to try to translate these hard bits of earthy wisdom, contrasting with class-specific access to modernity, also represented in the story, with the purpose of catering for the needs of western world.

In “The Politics of Translation,” Spivak advocates that the translator should avoid, as possible as they can, the dissemination of the politics of translation, so that the cultural specificities can be maintained in the texts of various ethnicities, languages and cultures, or even in their translations. By doing so, most of the Third World cultural texts or feminist texts will be free of the post-colonial construction of western languages (English and French) and male-centered construction.

Summary

In conclusion, the criticisms uttered within feminism should not be ignored and neglected. They actually pose new questions and new challenges for scholars and translators in this aspect, encouraging them to resurvey this translation theory and advance more discussions and research so as to maintain its further development.

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