On Translator’s Subjectivity from the Feminist Translation Perspective

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Abstract. Feminist translation theories have subverted the traditional standing of translation, highlighting the translator’s subjectivity. Emphasizing the creative treason in the translation process, feminism translations recognize and promote the status of translators in theory. In translation practice, feminist translators manipulate the source text to make the translators visible. Feminism reinterprets the relationship between translators’ subjectivity and the loyalty of translation from the perspective of gender studies. This paper discusses the relationship between the translators’ subjectivity and loyalty of translation from the feminist perspective. Feminism translations hold that translators who carry distinctive social, cultural and gender identity will inevitably leave their special mark on the translation works in the translation process. This serves as the need to highlight the subjectivity of translators. Feminist translation theories stand as one of the newly emerging translation theories which prosper with the cultural turn in translation studies.

1. Introduction

The combination of feminism and translation is inevitable to some level, a major outcome of the cultural turn. One the one hand, feminism needs to find an opportunity to express; on the other hand, translation is the best vehicle to demonstrate emotion and value orientation. The combination of feminist translation theories and translator’s subjectivity is the continued outcome of such appeal. This change directly contributed to the combination of feminist translation theories and the translator’s subjectivity and extended new research fields. The application of feminist translation theory in translation practice manifests itself in the interpreting and recreation of the original works from the female perspective and values. There is a lot of room for “creativity” and translator’s subjectivity, as “treason” actually promotes “creativity”, or the translator’s subjectivity in the more specific term. Feminist translators advocate feminized manipulation of the text in translation. Adopting a series of innovated translation strategies, such as rewriting, compensation, preface, footnotes, and hi-jacking, he/she not only weakens the gender discrimination in the original text but also manifests female strength to some degree. This way of translation could eliminate the male expression culture to the maximum, voice women’s presence through transforming the gender language, extend the implication of the original text, to achieve the same identity between the writer and the translator, thus the translator’s subjectivity is finally established.

In translation practice, the translators make decisions on the materials and strategies to use based on their gender identity and worldview, which is a complete betrayal against the traditional rule of “invisibility of the translators”. Feminist translators hope to display the identity and status of translators. They also raise a request about the right of authorship. If such request is satisfied, feminists will exhaust all means available to demonstrate the subjectivity of feminist translators via various channels. Advocates of feminist translations blow up the horn for “women’s voice to be heard and felt in the translations so that women’s image could be identified in the translations”. Feminist translations criticize traditional translation views in that the translation practice is considered as a static activity, which greatly refrains the subjectivity of translators. Also, the original text-centeredness makes creative translation lack of vigor just like flowers left in a silver vase. The translator serves as a bond between the original work and the readers. Translators as the subject of translation are the first reader of the target text. Thus, a translator is also an interpreter and an author in the target language. Translation happens in a time-space dislocated conversation. The original author and the translator can only use language as the medium for communication in a desynchronized manner.
2. Feminist Translation Theories

It is generally believed that feminist literary theories came into being as a result of the second climax of the feminist movements in the 1960s. It is the embodiment of feminism in a cultural context. In this movement, feminists found that gender inequality not only existed in social-political contexts such as rights to vote, employment and education rights but also manifested as a visible imprint in culture. From the 1970s, feminist movements surged forward in vigor. Feminists, unsatisfied with the unequal social treatment, attempted to obtain social recognition in the patriarchal society through various channels, with an aim of finding their voice in politics, economy, and culture. They demanded equality, tried to eliminate the stereotypes depicting women in social culture, and brought about the passion and creativity of women in all aspects. The feminist movement has been quite active in the cultural aspect. Language is not only used as a tool for communication, but also a powerful weapon to demonstrate feminism and establish female dignity.

To be liberated, women should start with rewriting the language. After the 1990s, the concept of feminism expanded to a broader scope to fight against cultural hegemony in all forms. Feminists took some concepts from deconstruction theories, post-colonialism, and cultural studies, to subvert or at least reevaluate the traditional value system in politics, religion, culture, language, and arts. The notion of feminist translation began to take shape.

The mission for feminist translation theories is to identify and criticize concepts that suppress female and translation as the underclass of society and literature. By revealing the feminization process of translation, the aim is to challenge, shake the authorities who are prone to maintain the original social order. For this purpose, feminist translators have done extensive theoretical explorations and translation practice, with a special focus on the translator’s subjectivity. Manifestations of such efforts have led to positive results. The feminist translator’s translation practice drew research attention once again back to the “identity” of translators, which in turn sparked a new round of passion redefining and interpreting the “identity” of translators. “Translator’s subjectivity” serves as the foundation of feminist translation theories. By questioning the traditional understanding of the inferior status position of translations as women’s subordinate positions, feminist translation theories emphasize the responsibility of translator as the subject of translation and as the dual author, so as to make translator’s subjectivity visible. Feminists borrowed concepts from deconstructionism, post-colonialism and cultural studies, in an attempt to reevaluate the traditional value system in politics, religion, culture, language, and arts. The impact of such theories was also brought into discovering and reflecting on translation and shaping the unique feminist translation view, which is, instead of being invisible in translations, feminist translators should make their existence prominent and their style prominent. Feminist translator Babara Godard boldly claimed that “in the discourse of feminism, translation means production, not a reproduction.” Translation as a scientific activity should reflect the facts in an objective manner.

However, the subjectivity of any activity has the potential value, feminism in particular. Feminism makes gender a very important factor in translation studies. Influenced by deconstructionism and post-colonialism, translation scholars start to notice the imperfection of thoughts in the original works and that different readers perceive the same source text from different perspectives. Such kind of reflection has a profound impact on efforts to change the status of translators. The translator’s subjectivity began to win widespread attention, with the results of feminist translations being the most outstanding. Feminist translators abandon the traditional male expression through the choice of translations and application of translation strategies, so as to realize manipulation of female over translation. Through recreation, the subjectivity of feminist translators can be fully presented, which greatly extended and pushed forward the implication of the original works, which in turn greatly enriches translation studies. Traditional translation theories highlight loyalty to the original works, deny the visibility of translators and obliterates the translator’s subjectivity. Feminism translation denies that translation is a kind of mechanical and default language transfer.

The purpose of feminism translation is to rewrite, to pinpoint the female translator’s subjectivity in recreation and rewriting, and to eliminate gender discrimination in politics and culture. The major
contribution of feminism translation theories is to fully elaborate and highlight the impact of gender factor on writing practice; secondly, feminist translators publicly call for attention to translator’s subjectivity to make translation as a kind of rewriting, so as to fight against the mail-centralism and gender discrimination against women in discourse and texts, to highlight the status of women in texts and to identify women’s status in real life. The combination of feminism and translation is determined by the similarity of status and origin, which is quite reasonable. A retrospect of human history reveals the fact that the idea of male superiority over female has been deeply rooted since ancient times. Women are seen as the vulnerable community in the society, marginalized in the social mechanism and gender roles. Women are seen as subordinate of men, and the same goes with translation. In the discourse of traditional translation theories, priority is given to the source text, while the translation is the by-products of the original works, affiliated with the source text. Therefore the translators are treated as “servant”, “matchmaker”. Second, it is innate to find imperfection both in women and in the translation works. Therefore women are trapped as the grassroots of the society, while translation works are always suppressed at the bottom of the cultural pyramid. Besides, the feminized identity of translation will inevitably lead the feminists to think and reflect. Under the backdrop of rising post-modernism and the “cultural turn” of translation studies, feminism and translation theories are bound to meet each other.

3. Creative Treason and Loyalty

The first one who proposed the concept of “creative treason” was the famous French literate Robert Escarpit. In his book Sociology of Literature, he pointed out that: “translation is treason because translation puts the original works in a completely unexpected reference system, i.e. the language. We also say the translation is creative because translation endows the original works a new shape, enabling a brand-new experience of literary exchange reaching out to a larger readership. Translation not only extends the life of the original works but also gives the original works a second life.” [1] In traditional translation views, the original works are “superior” because of its “originality”. To the contrary, the translations are “inferior” because of their “imitative” nature. With the rise of feminist translation studies, the upsetting status of translators and female and gender discrimination in translation studies have received severe criticism. Feminists argued that there exist all kinds of “binary opposition” in the society, such as the translations against original works, the translators against original authors, and the female against the male. Such “binary opposition” always manifests themselves in the superiority of the former over the latter or the other way around. As a matter of fact, to liberate translators and female from the subordinate status, such “binary opposition” point of view should be completely criticized and abandoned. Besides, from the perspective of “inter-textual theory”, every text has its pre-text and post-text. There is no “original text” in a definite sense, so the “original text” should be in no way authoritative. Quoting the words of Sherry Simon, “the translator and the author should work within the framework of the same time. His/her works should interact with each other like in a dialogue.” [2]

The concept of “Creative treason” was first proposed by French literary and sociologist Robert Escarpit. He said that: “Translation is always a kind of creative treason”. In China, Xie Tianzhen introduced this concept into translation studies as early as in 1992. Although not a completely new concept, feminists do have unparalleled interpretation and emphasis on creative treason. In Chinese and western translation history, “loyalty” or “faithfulness” is always considered the highest criterion in translation practice. Any practice not in line with such a rule will be criticized. The translators carrying the cross of “loyalty” on their back find it almost impossible to walk forward. Therefore, it is easy to understand that so many translators in history sigh about the difficulty of translation. Feminists are strongly against the view of “loyalty”. They believe that loyalty to the original text is nothing but an unreasonable demand passed on from the patriarchal society. Nowadays, the focus of discussion over “creative treason” is on its universal applicability in theory. Thus, feminists claim that: “for feminist translation, ‘loyalty’ is not for the author or the target reader, but for the writing plan, which involves both the author and the translator.” Feminists believe that “loyalty” not only concerns the writer but also the translator. As long as the translation accords with the fundamental
principles and goals of feminism, it should be considered as “loyal” and universally-acceptable. Besides, feminist translation also includes positive and intentional “treason”, advocating visibility of translator’s subjectivity by rewriting and manipulating the original text. In fact, the “creativity” and “treason” are inseparable in translation. Feminists highlight “treason”. Loyalty and equivalence have always been considered the ultimate goal of translation practice. However, the huge gap in culture and language makes the pursuit of loyalty nothing but a futile dream. Lawrence Venuti believes that the original text is a self-expression form designed properly for the author. It is the personality or intention of the author. The traditional translation ethics featuring loyalty actually design an imaginative world where the original work is positive while the translation is negative. The natural and active writing goes before the passive imitation of translation. As is pointed by Godard, the view of translation under the structural linguistics is based on the elimination of cultural differences and the translator’s subjectivity. The translator is seen as “a servant, an invisible hand who mechanically transfers one language into another language.” [3] Therefore, loyalty as a translation standard or even ethic used to evaluate and rate translations of all kind does not have a solid ground in that the translator’s subjectivity is overshadowed, while too much emphasis is put on the translator’s “invisibility”.

After subverting the interpretation of loyalty as against the traditional translation theories, feminist translation theory also proposes the unique view that the “loyalty” of translation, neither involves the author nor the reader, but rather a writing project where the author and reader both participate in. Both parties attempted to change the implication of the text to complete the project. In other words, feminist translation is typical of subjective creation. The translators, according to the specific expectation, change the content and form of the text. Feminist translator Joann Haugerud who rewrote the classical-Bible in this way: “Jesus told them—I am the food for life. Anyone who comes to me will never suffer hunger. Anyone who believes in me will never be thirsty. Anyone who comes to me will never be abandoned.” Nonetheless, classic translation always establishes the female and male gender from the standing point of men, while feminist translators would choose gender-neutral pronouns to express women’s pursuit of political power. It is thus necessary and inevitable to create in the translation process. “Loyalty” is defined as “neither to the author nor to the reader, but loyal to the writing project where the author and translator are both involved.”[4] The writing project emphasizes that the original author and the translator are collaborators who both participate in the translation process. At the same time, a writing project sees translation as a writing activity where the translator is actively involved. Such writing project does not seek unchanged stereotypes but focuses more on the process and outcome of translation, which to a large extent recognizes the subjectivity of the translators.

4. Features of Translators’ Subjectivity from Feminism Perspective

Feminists believe that languages in texts are full of gender discrimination. Just like requiring absolute obedience of women to men, the translations are always expected to be absolutely loyal to the original text. Such injustice had led to the invisibility of women’s voice and deprivation of women’s right of speech in the disguise/name of “loyalty”. Therefore, feminists stand strongly against the pure emphasis on “loyalty”, instead they seek translation strategies such as “treason” to uphold their rights. This serves as a strong theoretical basis for bringing out to the full subjectivity of the translators. Pushing forward by the wave of feminist movements, feminists greatly advocate intervention and reform of languages from the standing of the female perspective. Feminist translators employ translation and other vehicles to carry out language reforms. They take bold actions such as using new words, new spelling, new grammatical structures, new images, metaphors, and new wordplays to overcome the patriarchal hierarchy, to highlight female identity and people’s habitus understanding of women. [5]

Just as Sherry Simon puts it, “Women are in dearth need of language liberation which should start from the language.” Therefore, language has become a very powerful tool to help feminists to redefine women’s role. Feminist translators can be divided into the reformists and the radicals based
on their understanding of language and female issues. The reformists believe that the traditional language is the embodiment of society, where the language is bred. As long as it is out of good will, the language habit can be reformed to achieve the neutral point. Some of them even proposed reform plans, such as changing the old word, restructuring phrases and sentences, adding new neutral words and others to eliminate gender discrimination in languages; on the contrary, the radicals, who believe the traditional language is the very root for women's suppression, create their own language principles at will regardless of the innate principle and structure of the language. Feminist translation explores the process of translation feminization, questioning metaphors which long holds translation as inferior as female. Feminist translation theories also advocate constructing female-unique identity poetics through translation and emphasize the ideology and political standing of translation. By subverting the traditional “view of loyalty”, feminist translation theories break the myth over original author’s authority, liberate translation and the translators from the constraints of the original text and the author.

Translation is a transformation between two languages. The translator’s job is to convey the meaning of the original text to the reader while ensuring that the reader can accurately and clearly understand the translation and the intention of the original author. A translator is obligated to respect and follow the original work; secondly, the reader is also the master of translation; the translator’s work must satisfy both the author and the reader at the same time. The translation extends the life of the original work, introducing the original work to a larger world, which plays a pivotal role in the promotion and inheritance of the original work. Feminist translation theory values the intervention of culture, admire a symbiotic coexistence relation while rejecting the traditional stereotype of priority of original text over the translation. Feminist translations question the traditional translation standards while stressing the diversity of meaning and the subjectivity of translators. “Feminist translations liberate the translators and inspire them to be more creative. The speechless community is provided right to speak, interpreting the original text from a variety of perspectives, enriching the content of translation as text interpretation practice.” Rewriting is another tool adopted by feminists to manifest the translator’s subjectivity.

To make women’s image visible, women’s voice heard in translation, feminist translators usually realize creative treason through three major means or strategies: one is compensation to the difference or gap between the two languages (the source language and the target language). In the compensation process, the translator intervenes in the text to bring his/her ideas and beliefs into the translation. In the way, feminist translators can effectively manipulate the metadiscourse of the translation to blur the boundary of binary opposition between the author and the translator and to effectively manipulate the text. Meanwhile, other translation strategies such as supplementing, hijacking, prefacing and footnoting are also adopted by feminist translators to enhance the feminist feature in the translation. [6] For example, to add Sisters before Brothers in the translation of Bible is a kind of supplementing; writing a preface or adding footnotes are also common practice in feminist translation. The translator may interpret and describe the intention of the original author in preface and footnotes, to justify the translation strategies adopted; by adopting the hi-jacking strategy, feminist translators manipulate and feminize the texts in violence of feminist values according to the translators’ personal preference. “appropriation” refers to manipulating or in extreme cases rewriting the sentences or expressions in violence of feminism values. There are two scenarios in which the strategy of “word appropriation” is adopted, one to create new words and to use words already created by feminist practice. The former is not difficult to understand. For the latter scenario, practices such as using “herstory” rather than “history” and “chairperson” instead of “chairman” are good cases in point. In the book Body Bilingual: Translation as a Rewriting in the Feminine, it is pointed out that translation is not a neutralized but a more politicized practice. Feminist translators with political intentions usually adopt the supplementing strategy in translation. Prefacing and footnoting are extensively employed by feminist translators as they provide freedom and space for the translators to make clear their translation strategies, standards, and choice of language. The preface provides a channel for the translator to communicate with the readers and clarify how such strategies reflect the feminist consciousness and can deliver a stronger signal of
the translator’s subjectivity. Hi-jacking is also called appropriating. When the original text has a patriarchy-dominant style, feminists translators adopt a radical translation method, to bring the feminist tone to the translations and highlighting the feminist subjectivity.

5. Summary

Feminist translation brings gender, after language, history, and culture, into the keywords list in translation studies, and diversifies the perspective of translation studies. It helps to push forward the understanding of the translator’s role into a new development phase. Ignorance over the translator’s subjectivity does not comply with the law of nature and social advance. Feminist translation lifts the burden and brings the translator’s subjectivity under the spotlight. Translators are no longer neglected in the marginal zone, finding its existence in the translation. Interpretation of the translator’s subjectivity forms and highlights the major part of the feminist translation. Feminist translation expands the vision and horizon of translation studies and has generated a profound impact on the contemporary translation theory community. Studies on the translator’s subjectivity of feminist translation theory are not only original in theory but also far-reaching in practice. Due to the political nature of feminist theories, in certain practices the manipulation on the original works go too far; therefore its radical presentation sometimes departs from the nature of translation practiced. However, recognizing and highlighting the subjectivity in feminist translation develops new perspectives in translation studies. Giving play to translator’s subjectivity and exploring self-identity, feminist translators construct the identity of female translators. The last 30 years of the 20th century is called the era of feminism. The feminist translation theories have generated far-reaching impact on translation theory and practice. Feminist translation theories set up a brand-new platform for translation studies. Feminists give full play to the translators’ subjectivity, highlight female identity and value individual interest and need by “rectification” or “intervention” of languages. Feminist translations are determined to eliminate the male-centeredness or gender discrimination in language, to challenge the authority of patriarchy in society. Feminist translations rewrite the subordinate and weak status of women and shift the focus of research to the weak culture and the marginalized culture.

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