



Interrogating Translation Through Gender Perspectives

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Abstract:

This paper intends to focus on the problematics of translation in relation to the concept of gender. The process of translation is an activity, apparently a secondary evolution where the text from the source language is transferred to a target language. But, so far as, the applicability is concerned, it involves various other aspects apart from language such as, cultures, ideas, context, etc. Translation has always been understood and depicted as a derivative evolved from a different root, a cognate, a subordinate entity and thus, has received the feminine treatment. Therefore, the original text holding the masculine identity has been considered superior whereas the translation stands as an ancillary and a subservient to the original text. This particular article attempts to discuss and unpack translation as a creative process, rather than a secondary dependent activity.

Keywords: gender, translation, power-relation, feminine, creativity, lop-sided

“Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.”

- Anthony Burgess

Translation refers to the process of communication of meaning from one language (source) to another language (target). Translator’s choice relies on a pool of factors that determine not only the language, but also the socio-cultural backdrop as assistance in generating a dynamic discourse. As per the modern theories, translation has been redefined as a “cultural exchange with profound awareness of cultural difference and linguistic boundaries” (Federici 2013, p.3). This new formulation of translation theory, highlighted on a gender-biased bearing, offers

ambivalence and increases the breach between the original and the translation to a larger extent. The term ‘gender’ has been understood in relation to cultural construct rather than biological entity since 1970s. It is a reference which pictures that women are made and not born. This kind of an idea had already been formulated by Simone de Beauvoir in 1940s. Translation Studies has gained prominence since 1980s. A parallel can be drawn between feminism and translation studies, rejecting conventional hegemony, power structure and gender roles, and fidelity. In this case, language functions as an instrument for self- contention and for validating one’s own stance in their respective hierarchical structure. Hence, the origination and innovation of meaning becomes primary, both in the case of translation as well as feminism. In this regard, Lori Chamberlaine has put forth her viewpoint which focuses on how translation has captured cultural complicity between the issues of fidelity in translation and marriage. In *Les Belles Infideles* Chamberlaine says, “Fidelity is defined by an implicit contract between translation (as a woman) and the original (as husband, father or author)” (Chamberlaine, 1988). As a consequence, the process of translation is termed as reproduction or recreation having no originality. Both woman and translation should be truthful and devoted to their masters-- man and original text respectively. Besides, it lacks enterprise and ownership and thus, turns out to be a subservient left in a subjugated state. The process of translation is certainly not mere “linguistic, scientific transfer” rather, an “operation of thought” and a “translation of ourselves into the thought of the other language” (Gentzler 2001, p.155). The idea of femininity is a thrust on conceptualizing translation and therefore, the traits like being subservient and lacking authority establishes a relationship with translation. Subsequently, women and translators are put on the same plane. In other words, they are inferiorized. Sherry Simon has reflected, “Translators and women have historically been the weaker figure in their respective hierarchies; translators are handmaidens to authors, women inferior to men” (Simon, 1996, p.1).

Judith Butler has underlined the concept that the gender hierarchy is a socially constructed framework. The gender roles and the references made to each gender are the contribution of the socio-cultural label as the idea of gender comes from the social existence and not from birth. She adds, “Nobody is born one gender or the other ... we act and walk and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman” (Miller, 2011). There are limitations on the above statement because sex may not always determine gender roles and someone’s sex cannot always reveal their sexual orientation which makes the whole idea very unclear i.e. whether someone is a lesbian, gay, bisexual or a transgender. So, putting the idea of sex or gender in a straight jacket makes it more ambivalent to decipher. The socio- cultural implications of understanding translation could be reviewed by Butler’s argument both as gender of the translator as well as nature of the practice of translation, which becomes inadequate to examine the dominated and subjugated status of translation. Butler too has added to this idea on ‘female’ and ‘woman’ as relative notions, “female no longer appears to be a stable notion” and that “its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as woman” (Butler 2002, p.xi). In accordance with this elaboration, subordinate status can no longer disparage femininity; rather it has opened vistas for exploring both feminism as well as translation as new domains of representation which does not merely reflect the fact but contributes to the larger picture from a creative angle. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir cannot be forgotten for her famous notion, “one is not born a woman, but, rather,

becomes one” (de Beauvoir 1975, p.1). So, defining man and woman based on biological functioning is very much a limited idea. Butler has focused on differences between ‘performance and performativity’. She adds, “Whereas performance presupposes a pre-existing subject, performativity contests the very notion of the subject” (Butler 1994, p.33). Performativity is the outcome, which is generated by the undertaking formulated in relation to the given context. Michelle Lazar supports Butler, while she states that occurrence of performativity takes place through the medium of language and discourse. She has exemplified by citing the sensitive “new age” fathers who bear signifiers conventionally associated with motherhood. (Lazar 2000)

Sherry Simon has understood feminism and translation as indistinguishable institution. “Both feminism and translation deal with the idea i.e. ‘secondariness comes to be defined and canonized’; both are the tools for the critical understanding of difference as it is represented in language” (Simon 1996, p.8).

Basically, she interrogates translation in terms of socio-cultural changes. That is the very reason translation is castigated from being secondary and lacking authority; it is a reproduction of the “original in such a way that the priority of the original is not reinforced but by the very fact it can be stimulated, copied, transferred, transformed, and made into a simulacrum and so on” (p. 144). In that sense and as per the poststructuralist theories, original texts are also defined by the reader-response theory as, “away from the authority of the author towards the role of the reader as well as undermining the notion of the original as stable, objectively transferable entity” (Wallmach 2006, p. 5-6).

Ultimately both the original and the translation can be put under the same category, neither stable nor fixed, rather open to varied interpretation in a given socio-cultural context. In this light, Simon has added,

The ‘original’ is never finished or complete in itself. The ‘originary’ is always open to translation so that it cannot be said to have a totalized prior moment for being or meaning... an essence (Simon 1996, pg. 144).

Therefore, both the aspects of a text can be taken together for representing their unification. An original text and a translated text are the outcome of creative processes involving a series of signifiers to appropriately communicate a particular message within a socio-cultural framework. The original text undergoes a change through translation and the translator redefines the original content and thus, the translated version is neither a derivative nor a subservient to the original. Translation therefore, becomes a kind of writing project in which the author and the translator are stakeholders in co-sharing.

So far as, the feminist translators are concerned, ‘interventionism’ serves as a great deal as it creates a space where their voice is heard and their contribution becomes definitive. It makes their work more visible and creates a shield for both the women and translations from getting downgraded to “the bottom of the social ladder” (Simon 1996, p.1). Footnoting and explaining are interventionist modes for extending and developing the motto of the original text without affecting it, as Simon states, “they also accentuate the difference between original and translation and explain the mode of circulation of the translated text in its new environment” (p.28). These are all

instruments for the concentration of the creativity of women translators. It also helps them uphold their social and literary position from the state of alterity. Just like feminist writings, feminist translation too disturbs the patriarchal authority and consequently, the hegemony questions even their set of translated works. So, feminist translators offer themselves “permission to make their work visible, discuss the creative process they are engaged in, collude with and challenge the writers they translate” (von Flotow 1991, p.74). Production of authoritative feminist translations supports them to negotiate as well as challenge the authority of the original text in order to have a highly visible, accredited text produced through translation with a feminine ascendant voice.

A translated work is equally appealing, creative and expressive like the original text and that happens only when the translator is not held back by any constraints, and this further enables his/her creative side to flow smoothly. For instance, FitzGerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam (1859) brought him global recognition as he did not put himself in a subdued position while translating, but treated himself as a responsible self-assured translator for any flaw that might be found out in the translated text. As a result, he co-authored the text and that empowering work of translation offered him much visibility outdoing the problematics of power structure disparity. In case of the original text or the source text, the readership is merely confined to that same language for amounting to limited circulation of the work. But in case of translation, though it is heavily criticized for being inferior and a subservient, yet, it creates possibility of a global readership beyond language, culture, race, ethnicity, etc. For example, the original Odia novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (1896) by Fakir Mohan Senapati got a wide circulation after it was translated into English that is *Six Acres and a Third*. Similarly, the Odia novel *Basanti* (1931) by Annada Shankar Ray, et al. is a collective production of nine different authors to develop a single plot. The text’s rediscovery in 2019 through its English translation has set a particular standard with the help of which, people are reminded of a language hardly spoken by two to three crores of people. In other words, translation as a construct bridges the gap between a regional language and an international/ global language. Even Rabindranath Tagore, translated some of his Bengali poems into English not merely for private recreation. As an example, we have *Gitanjali*, a collection of poetry published in 1910 and translated into prose poems in English in 1912. He had in mind some foreign readers who were genuinely eager to have an acquaintance with his poetical works but were unable to access them in the original due to linguistic barriers. So, in this case, the text in its original language turns out to be a kind of limitation in itself. It is the process of translation through which an original creative work with any regional content acquires a global reach and achieves a distinguished status. Besides, without translation, the original remains as “Other” to the speakers other than that language. This state of alterity confines the intellectual horizon of any literary work if not translated. Translation, thus, opens up the possibilities of new and widely acclaimed readership, perceptibility and an upgraded status.

Further expansion of the original or the source text and the translation underscores the gender differences recoiling it more, and making translation as an activism more hostile in nature. Such ideology would benefit none, neither the original nor the translation. There is every possibility of increasing hostility and belligerence between the

both i.e. the original and the translation, just like between the genders. Michelle Lazar disapproves extremism and hostility in promulgating the 'feminist cause'. She argues,

Feminists' concern for women empowerment is appropriated and recontextualised by advertisers, evacuating it of its political content and instead infusing meanings quite antithetical to feminism (Lazar 2007, p.159).

Of course she is not against feminism; she rather rejects the idea of putting one gender down so that the other rises, as patriarchy has been doing since long. She is talking about striking a fine balance between both the genders and neutralizing the gender power structure. In this light, Butler too discards the idea of radical feminism and extremism in their approach as she says, "feminism opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation" (Butler 2002, p.5). Butler's proposal of harmonizing the disagreeing power attitude is to think of gender as free and fluid. She puts it in this manner, "when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free- floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body, as easily a female one" (Butler 2002, p.10). Likewise, Sherry Simon has the same state of understanding about translation, i.e.

The process of translation must be seen as a fluid production of meaning, similar to other kinds of writing. The hierarchy of writing roles like gender identities should be increasingly recognized as mobile and performative. The interstitial becomes the focus of investigation; polarized extremes abandoned (Simon 1996, p.12).

Such flexible analysis of 'free-floating' gender harmonizes the agenda of 'fidelity', 'authority' and 'visibility' as a translated text would have the freedom to a larger extent and at the same time it would bear the responsibility that results in expelling fundamentalist discourse for creating an empowered and highly visible translation.

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