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The Dynamics of Gender in Translation

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Abstract: Gender is perhaps one of the most restless terms in the English language, a word whose uses seem to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new inflexions of meaning. One talks about gender roles and the gender gap, questions ideas that are gender-biased or gender-specific. It is a much-contested concept, slippery yet indispensable. In this essay, I will investigate the role of gender in translation drawing primarily from the comprehensive study of feminist issues in translation theory and practice by Sherry Simon and Luise von Flotow's,[2] and their useful discussion of feminist translations. I will also examine Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's[3,4,5,6] commentaries on her translations of the Bengali language writer Mahasweta Devi,[7,8] which have forcefully articulated the material reality of postcolonial nationalism from the embodied standpoint of tribal, subaltern women.

Keywords: Translation study, Gender Politics, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahashweta Devi, Feminism

Historically, the conventional view looks at a translation as a secondary work dependent on, and subservient to, the original text. All translations since seen as secondary are also reputed as female, thus articulating the heritage of double inferiority. One cliche, proclaims, "Only one syllable differentiates a translator from a traitor", puns on the Italian words *traduttore* (translator, masculine) and *traditore* (traitor, masculine). The pun warns what a treacherous occupation translating is, for a mere slip of the pen can transform the whole effort of transporting a text from one language to another into a betrayal that reaches out from a single word to infect the entire culture. It seems significant that this pun works only in the masculine formation, and even more so, that the pocket-size Barnes and Noble English-Italian; Italian-English Dictionary, which gives the feminine of "traitor" as *traditrice*, offers no feminine form for "translator". The cliche, in the context of the Dictionary's omission, suggests how pervasively gendered the assumptions about translation (and also about translators and writers) are. This gendered notion becomes explicit in yet another truism, "A literal translation is plodding, like a faithful wife and a literary translation is free, like a loose woman." Likening a translation to a woman, this statement assumes, first, that an original text is like a man, and second, that the relationship between a text and its translation is like a hierarchical, heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman. In this textual or sexual relationship, the original text, which is equated to the man, determines a tyrannical dualism, which defines a translation (or a woman) as literal or literary, tedious or thrilling, domestic or dangerous, too faithful or too free. As in the age-old paradox that binds women into the roles of virgin and whore, a translation, like a woman, can never achieve an appropriate balance. Thus, a translation lives an imperfect female version of the male original. We find a prototype for this notion in the second story of Creation (Gen. 2:5–23), where God translates doubly: The Creator carries across the breath of life by transforming dust into a man, and then the man's rib into a woman. When the man proclaims, "She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man", his derivative naming of the woman (*isha* from *ish;* woman from man) creates the assumptions about translation upon which the cliches are based. Typical also is the seventeenth-century image of *les belles infidels*, an adage that declares that, like women, translations must be either beautiful or faithful. This adage very problematically positions fidelity as the opposite of beauty, ethics as the opposite of elegance, and the drudgery of moral obligation as incompatible with stylistic felicity. The conventional view of translation supposes an active original and a passive translation, creation followed by a passive act of transmission.

What the above cliches do not acknowledge is that translation is transformation, as much the "changing of forms" as the "carrying across" from one language to another. The act of translating creates a text that is something "other", that lives on its own terms. The act of translating is the supreme art of making choices. The translator must constantly negotiate between risk and compromise, originality and collaboration, individuality and community. Translation, though, transcends the dualism of these paired opposites. Rather than choosing to be either faithful or free, either a patriot or a traitor, the translator must create more terms, shape other terms, and rearrange old terms. By selecting, modifying, combining, and recasting these terms, the translator will transform a text embedded in one language and culture into a different text in a second language. This new text might appear to replace the original. In fact, each translation continually converses with its original, which does not vanish, but shimmers beneath the second language. Rereading, answering, and querying, the translation keeps the text in motion. Translation is concerned not only with the relationship between two languages but also between two textual systems. Literary translations become texts in their own right so that the traditional boundary set up to separate original works from their translations collapses. Theorists of translation, such as Susan Bassnett, stress that equivalence or fidelity in translation should not be approached as a search for sameness. It should rather be perceived as a dialectic between signs and structures within and surrounding the source language and target language texts. Feminist translation reopens the dilemma of fidelity. Simon writes:

> Participating in a sensibility which is suspicious of any fundamental truths, which sees both the "meaning" of the original and the "message" intended for the reader as uncertain, as being constantly subject to interpretation and distortion, feminist translation understands fidelity as a movement synchronous with the writing project-a project in which both writer and translator participate.[9(p30)]

The alliance between translation studies and feminism emerged out of a common intellectual and institutional context. As fields of enquiry, which emerged during the 1970s and gained increasing institutional recognition through the 1980s, Translation Studies and feminist thought are similarly grounded in the dynamics of a period that gave strong prominence to language. Translation studies have been impelled by many of the concerns central to feminism: the distrust of traditional hierarchies and gendered roles (as discussed above), deep suspicion of rules defining fidelity, and the questioning of universal standards of meaning and value. Both are concerned with the way "secondariness" comes to be defined and canonised; both are tools for a critical understanding of difference as it is represented in language. Both question how social, sexual, and historical differences can be transferred across languages. For both, language intervenes actively in the creation of meaning. Language is not a mere means of presenting reality, and thus acting like a mirror. It rather actively contributes to it. Translators, thus, use language as a cultural intervention.

The two key terms above are "language" and "difference". In particular, the activity of translation is haunted by the tantalising question of evaluating the "correctness" of the final product, and opinions vary along a spectrum, ranging from the view that a translated piece tells us more about the translator "herself" than the contents of the original to the one that a meticulous insistence on literalness (no difference) must be tempered by close attention to the "spirit" of the original. Therefore, though traditionally, "difference" is a negative topos in translation, it becomes a positive one in feminist translation. Barbara Godard,[10] in her essay "Theorising Feminist Discourse/Translation" points out that feminist translation is signifying of difference despite similarity. She writes:

> The Feminist translator, affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text. *Womanhandling* the text in translation would involve the replacement of the modest self-effacing translator.
>
> Taking her place would be an active participant in the creation of meaning who advances a conditional analysis.[10(p94)]

Luise von Flotow offers the example of Barbara Godard's translation of *L'Amer*,[2] a novel by Nicole Brossard, and describes the very didactic role of Gogard's prefaces, which both explain the intentions of the original text and outline her own translation strategies. As against the argument of the invisibility of the translator, the feminist translator immodestly flaunts her signature in italics, in the footnotes, and in the preface. Feminist translators redefined language as a powerful political tool. Luise von Flotow highlights the feminist experimental writing by Hélène Cixous, Mary Daly, Nicole Brossard,

and Louky Bersianik, which contributed to politicising translators and initiated a wave of new translation practices, including translating the body, cultural puns, and wordplay; "sanitising" sexist and/or racist representations; asserting the presence of the feminist translating subject; and recovering women's writing "lost" in patriarchy.[2] The goal of feminist translation, viewed as "rewriting in the feminine", is to make "women visible in language". Theories of translation reveal increasing gender awareness, drawing attention to the "translation effect" as a trace of the translator's gendered agency in the text. This agency often assumes the form of annotations or critical commentaries accompanying the translation. Feminist theorists pose questions about the politics of language, cultural differences, as well as the ethics of translation, revising traditional sexist metaphors and reinterpreting "translation myths" (the Tower of Babel and Pandora's Box). Luise Von Flotow mentions interesting comparative studies of existing translations (especially of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and the Bible), which lead to feminist rewritings of standard texts.[2] Through *Translation and Gender*, she delivers a concise and comprehensive introduction to feminist approaches to translation, though there is perhaps too little here on translation as seen from "minority" perspectives, which can be provided by cultural studies and postcolonial studies. Luise Von Flotow's perspective on gender and translation tends to be Eurocentric, which cannot be remedied by references to *La Malinche*, one anthology of Indian writing, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (the latter evoked in the context of being democratic with minorities). The problems of race, ethnicity, class, and even sexuality, are barely touched upon as part of power dynamics in cross-cultural translation. These issues are focused upon by Spivak, which I will discuss later on in the essay.

Coming back to the aspect of language, feminism has been one of the most potent forms of cultural identity to take on linguistic and social expression over the last decades. The call from all quarters is that women's liberation must first be the liberation of/from language. There has emerged a clear sense of language as a site of contested meanings, as an arena in which subjects test and prove themselves. French feminists have deeply examined the nexus of meaning and relationship between the two key concepts, namely, difference and language. Helene Cixous,[11] for example, puts forward the concept of *Écriture féminine/*feminine writing. *Écriture féminine* places experience before language, and privileges the non-linear, cyclical writing so often frowned upon by patriarchal society. Sherry Simon points out how feminist translation principles are involved in various areas of cultural transmissions, including the transatlantic displacement of the writings of French feminists.[1] She traces the displacement of French feminist writings in Anglo-American translation, analysing important aspects of the translations—terms deemed "untranslatable", for example—and examines the tensions characteristic of that particular transatlantic exchange. Simon discusses problems in the reception of this work that are a result of a number of "translation effects", among others, the time-lag between France and North America, the incomplete translations of an author's oeuvre (Cixous) and its resulting biased reception, the vastly differing social and intellectual contexts that mark the source and the translated texts. She shows that because most of this work was read in translation but discussed by critics as though it had been written in English, matters are made even more complex; she further develops the idea that this is characteristic of "the insensitivity to translation common to members of all imperialist cultures".[1(pp134-66)]

Feminist translation is a testing ground for cultural meaning. In emphasising the crucial historical and ideological role of gender in language, by underscoring the role of subjectivity in framing and reclaiming meaning, feminist translators, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, foreground the cultural identity of women. She has paid attention to translation in the double context of both gender and cultural identity. However, to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "language isn't everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries." In her essay "The Politics of Translation", Spivak locates the task of interpretation or translation as a way to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency. For Spivak, meaning unfolds as the speaker's location is upbraided to reveal the inner workings that have been constructed in the historical and social moment. She sees language as providing clues to knowledge that permit us to engage in the site of negotiation or the place where communication occurs. By focusing on this interstitial space, the politics of language can serve as a means of eliminating the binary logic of Western translation, which remains stuck in a literal or figurative translation of language. In deconstructing language, Spivak distinguishes between its logic and rhetoric. To her, the logic of language allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections, while its rhetoric disrupts this logic and generates space for contingency. As she describes it, rhetoric works in the silence between and around words to see what works and how much. She advises that a translator must "surrender" to the text, as translation is the most intimate act of

reading. It is an act of submission to the rhetorical dimension of the text. This act for Spivak is more of an erotic act than ethical. According to Sherry Simon, this description of the erotic in translation could perhaps be read as a parodic inversion of George Steiner's description of the hermeneutic motion. Using aggressively male imagery, Steiner describes the act of penetration of the text through which the "translator invades, extracts, and brings home".[12(p144)]

She also advises that one's first obligation in understanding solidarity is to learn other women's mother tongues rather than consider solidarity as an "a priori"-given. Translation for Spivak is no mere quest for verbal equivalents but an act of understanding the other as well as the self. For her, it also has a political dimension, as it is a strategy that can be consciously employed.

> About "Breast Giver," Mahasweta has said a number of times that she feels she is reading her own Bengali. And I won't teach anything if I can't strain toward that fidelity. In the case of texts "not written in English," such teaching turns out to be translation work, day in day out. I invite my undergraduates to think the shift between *eleos*, which is translated "pity" in Aristotle and translated "mercy" in the great Christian hymn *Kyrie eleison*—Greek-to-Greek, when there was not yet an English to pass through—so that they don't think the only way to "understand" anything is by way of their mother tongue, the dominant world language that has no history.[6(p)]

She uses the feminine metaphors of submission, intimacy, and understanding for theorising about translation. Thus, theorising about translation receives a feminist slant. However, for Spivak, translation is never complete for the speaker or the listener, as each has their own claim to knowledge that is utilised in this interpretation, and so the difficult task then is to bring ourselves as close as possible to the authentic experience while knowing that this map of knowledge will be continually redrawn, contested, and can never be definitive.

It is in the translations and commentaries on the Bengali-language writer Mahasweta Devi that Spivak has done more than any other literary critic to articulate the histories and struggles of subaltern women with a political commitment that is always tempered by an acute awareness of the ethical limitations of such a project. "I believe becoming a cultural broker has been an unintended consequence of my translating Mahasweta Devi, but surely not Jacques Derrida?" Spivak, in her translation of Mahasweta Devi's story *Stanadayini* (Breast Giver), considers the story as challenging the truth claims of elite historical discourse in India by narrating the story of national independence from the point of view of a subaltern woman. In Mahasweta Devi's authorial commentary on the story, the tragic narrative of Jashoda, a subaltern woman, who is forced into servile labour as a mother to nurse the children of a wealthy Brahmin family, is "a parable of decolonisation". For the author, the maternal body of Jashoda stands as a metaphor for the national body politic after decolonisation. However, for Spivak, Mahasweta Devi's reading of the story as an allegory of nationalism troublingly ignores the lower-class position of subaltern women such as Jashoda. Against Mahasweta Devi's authorial commentary on the story, Spivak argues the story highlights the particular social oppression of subaltern women in the context of postcolonial nationalism. Drawing on a critical vocabulary of Marxist feminism, Spivak demonstrates how Jashoda's reproductive body becomes a site of economic exploitation in the text. Jashodha problematises the male-centred definition of the working-class subject that underwrites classic European Marxism. In the story, the protagonist illustrates how a subaltern woman's reproductive body is employed to produce economic value.

> *Stanadayini* calls into question that aspect of Western Marxist feminism which, from the point of view of work, trivialises the theory of value, and from the point of view of mothering as work, ignores the mother as subject.Spivak [(p258)]

Spivak's reading and translation of the story is very persuasive. In an essay (on Spivak's textual commentaries and translations of Mahasweta Devi's fiction) titled "Tribal Stories, Scribal Worlds", Minoli Salgado identifies several discrepancies between Mahasweta Devi's original stories and Spivak's translations of these stories. In particular, Salgado notes how Spivak's italicisation of English words in Mahasweta Devi's original text works to "dramatise
the effects of state domination". By doing so Salgado contends that Spivak exaggerates the "contestational and oppositional nature of Mahasweta's work".[13(pp134–135)] Salgado argues that Spivak's claim that Devi's work punctures nationalist discourse would seem to contradict Mahasweta's call for "the tribal people's insertion into the Indian mainstream".

What is at stake in Salgado's criticism of Spivak's translation and interpretation of Mahasweta Devi's writing is a broader argument that Spivak is helping to commodify Mahasweta Devi's texts for an international market by inserting the texts into Western theoretical discourse which has no connection or relationship to the people or culture depicted in Mahasweta Devi's fiction. However, to be fair, Spivak does acknowledge this difficulty at the forefront of her translation:

> The ravenous hunger for Third World Literary texts in English translation is part of the benevolence and part of the problem…by translating this text *Stanadayini* I am contributing to both.Spivak (p253)

To alleviate this difficulty, Spivak develops an ethics of reading which is more sensitive to the social location of subaltern women. Against the charges of theoretical difficulty made by critics such as Salgado, she argues that such charges are based on a critical position "which predicates the possibility of knowledge on identity".Spivak(p254) Spivak is sceptical about the political benefits to be gained from benevolent Western radicals speaking for postcolonial subjects. As she writes, "It is when *only* the dominant groups theorise that the situation becomes intolerable."(p253)

For Spivak, one of the important questions that the fiction of Mahasweta Devi raises is whether subaltern women such as Jashoda have any political agency or voice in the nation state. This question of subaltern women's political agency is further explored in the short story "Draupadi", which has also been translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The story is set in the northern region of West Bengal during the time of a rural-based peasant rebellion against the economic and political oppression of landowners and the government in the late 1960s. The narrative recounts the events leading up to the capture and subsequent torture of one of the peasant insurgents by the state military forces, a woman named Draupadi or Dopdi Mjhen. As Spivak notes in the "Translator's Foreword" to "Draupadi", the first part of the story is narrated from the point of view of Senanayak, the army chief who hunts the leaders of the Naxalite rebellion. In order to catch these people, he tries to understand their political motivation by reading Left-wing literature. For Spivak, Senanayak's avaricious intellectual pursuit is not dissimilar to "the first world scholars in search of the Third world".(p179) Indeed, for Spivak, Senanayak's futile attempts to translate Dopdi's song later in the story could be seen to mirror the First World readers desire to know the subaltern by interpreting Mahasweta Devi's story:

> Although we are told of specialists, the meaning of Dopdi's song remains undisclosed in the text. The educated Bengali does not know the language of the tribes, and no political coercion obliges him to "know" it. What one might falsely think of as a political privilege-knowing English properly stands in the way of a deconstructive practice of language-using it "correctly" through a political displacement, or operating the language of the other side.(p186)

As Spivak points out, the "privilege" of knowing English properly prevents both Senanayak and the First World reader from translating Draupadi's song. In this respect, Draupadi could be seen as a textual enigma, whose agency lies in the refusal to confess her meaning and the story to the reader. The story also raises questions about the protagonist's political agency through its rewriting of the ancient Indian epic the Mahabharata. Mahasweta Devi rewrites the scene from the epic by having Draupadi remain publically naked at her own insistence. She interrogates, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?"(p196) For Spivak, these questions effectively
reverse the linguistic subject positions of the interrogator and the interrogated, and so work to challenge the authority of the ruling elite.

Spivak's translations and commentaries on Mahasweta Devi's fiction have done much to articulate the histories of tribal subaltern women. Spivak is certainly very conscious of the political risk involved in translating Mahasweta Devi's fiction for a largely Western readership. One of the dangers with Spivak's translations is that the narratives could be taken out of context to represent a tragic stereotype of postcolonial victimhood. By employing the tools of deconstruction, however, Spivak resists the temptation to represent the fictional subaltern characters in Mahasweta Devi's writing as transparent objects of knowledge for Western-trained intellectuals. Instead, Spivak traces the linguistic and rhetorical nuances in Mahasweta Devi's texts where tribal, subaltern women characters like Jashoda and Draupadi articulate an embodied knowledge that cannot be accounted for in the dominant terms of Western knowledge and representation.

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