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Rethinking Gender in Translation

By Khaoula Jaoudi¹

Abstract

The mediator between people all over the world is language, and translation is the means by which we can cross borders. Translation can play an important role in moving towards a common livable world of coexistence and transnationality. Feminist translation theory emerged from the shared struggle women and translation experience; it criticizes the concepts that place both women and translation at the bottom of the literary and social scale. “La liberation des femmes passé par le language” is a famous saying among women of the 1970s feminist movement which indicates that women must be first liberated from language. And since translation is made of language, it is considered by feminist thought to be the best field in which they can nourish language. A critique of sexism in language goes through several stages: it corrects the vocabulary, examines the feminine symbols in language, and gives voice to gender in language since gendered language is responsible for creating misinterpretations. Hence, in this paper I am going to examine the intersection between feminism and translation. I will investigate how feminist translation can give birth to reformist recreations of an original text that is dominantly masculine by recovering the feminine that is obscured and made invisible by masculine grammar. In addition, I will also discuss how translation gives another life to the original text by using different strategies to make gender visible in the text’s language so that women can be heard. Finally, I am going to discuss women’s translation of the sacred by comparing two feminist translations of the Quran.

Keywords: Translation, Transnationality, Gender, Sacred, Comparativism, Feminism

Introduction

“Every act of communication is a miracle of translation.”– Ken Liu

Translation is the best literary means of expression for gender oppression. During the English Renaissance, women largely participated in the practice of the sacred translation when they were prevented from any other type of writing. This represents literary gender roles that create intensified tension between gender positions. Translation is considered the rebirth of the original text and because of translation we remember the original. However, considering translation is an interpretation, it does not restate the original’s ideas as they are. Translation is a rewriting, recreation, and reproduction that stems from the translator’s interpretation of the text. Hence, my paper will discuss how female translators give another life to the original text through using different strategies to make gender visible in the text’s language, with sacred texts in particular. I am reading two English translations of the Quran which work as new

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readings of the sacred, especially gendered verses. In this paper, first, I write about how translation can serve as the other life of the original text, thus equal to it rather than inferior and subordinate. Next, I speak about feminists' contribution to the translation field (their use of new translating strategies to give voice to feminine in language). Finally, I present a comparative study of two English translations of the Quran, namely Laleh Bakhtiar's *The Sublime Quran* and *The Quran: A Reformist Translation* by Edip Yuksel, Layth Saleh al-Shaiban, and Martha Schul.

Translation as Rebirth

The definition of translation is stuck in the traditional vision that it is an act of transferring meaning from the original language to another. The translated text is depicted as weak and treated as second hand in relation to the original which is considered superior; even its name 'original' gives it immense credibility in relation to its translation. This traditional belief imprisons the original and the translation inside the binary opposition framework and sees the second dependent on the first; it also diminishes all aspects of cultural residues. Susan Bassnett argues that translation must overcome this old rigid concept and move to a more inclusive vision of conceptualizing translation as an active process interrelated with cultural and political systems (66). In addition, translation must no longer be treated as inferior or servant to the author or the original text. Henceforth, polarities and binaries must be deconstructed to achieve a better understanding of social and literary relations. Through deconstruction we can also abolish the belief that equivalence in translation is a one to one premise, rather, we shall consider translation an independent entity just like any other literary text.

As noted by Simon, "Translation is consistently represented as an unequal struggle for authority over the text: the author is the landlord, the translation simply a tenant" (Simon 9). Hence, the translator and translation are never treated equally to the original text and its author. The translator is not a passive servant who reproduces the norms of the receiving culture. He/she transmits his/her subjectivity and critical interventions in the active process of recreation in which they can formulate and reformulate aesthetic and ethical goals. This existing tension goes back to matters of power as Lori Chamberlain argues:

"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". (465)

Opposing the traditional outlook on translation, according to Barbara Godard's theory of metonymic nature of translation, translation is a reworking of meaning, a continuation of meaning creation within a network of social discourses rather than merely a transfer from one language to another. This theory breaks the typical definition of translation as a second hand to the original, superior text. Translation gives birth to meaning and conceptions; it is an active process of recreation and reproduction. Thus, it is not supposed to always refer to the original. In fact, because of translations, the original works would reach a death date and be forgotten. Even sometimes, translations are more known than the original text; i.e. Paulo Coelho's works are more read in English than in its original language, which is Portuguese.

Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay "The task of the Translator", declares that the translation and the original have different stances in the world of art. This justifies that he does not see translation as inferior to the original; rather, it is a text that performs a communicative

transmitting function. “For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life” (Benjamin 254). He further argues that a good translation does not have any inherent significance in the original and that translations are not merely transmissions of meaning; it never owes its existence to the original work nor does it serve the original. Translation permits the original’s life to reach its latest renewal and disclosure. Moreover, the traditional term used in discussing matters of translation is ‘fidelity’ which aims at providing faithful reproduction of words. However, if we want to argue on a theory of translation that surpasses the typical process of reproducing meaning, we must overcome this idea of defining translation in terms of faithfulness because it suggests reliance on another text. Benjamin states:

“A translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel... On the other hand, as regards the meaning, the language of a translation can-in fact, must-let itself go, so that it gives voice to the intention of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of intention. Therefore, it is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language” (260).

Although, Translation touches lightly on matters of sense, it has to pursue its own course sponsored by the laws of cultural and linguistic freedom. Translation must be set free; as Benjamin mentions, the most important task in translating is to free language from the constraints of the history of the original text. Thus, to free language from its gender, racial and oppressing tendencies:

“It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of the pure language, he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language” (Benjamin 261).

Translation and women share the same status of inferiority and subordination throughout history—women being inferior to men and translation to the original text—and they are both seen as the weakest in the line of hierarchies. Thus, translation is considered as culturally taking the female position of discursive inferiority in society. So, female translators easily associate themselves with translation: “I am a translation because I am a woman” (De Lotbinière-Harwood 95).

Feminist Translation Theory

Feminist translation theory emerged from the shared struggle women and translation experience; it criticizes the concepts that place both women and translation at the bottom of the literary and social scale. Thus, feminist translators believe that translation has been feminized and investigate the authoritarian structure that lies behind this marginalization. Feminists also seek to challenge those demeaned terms in language that refer to translation and replace it with terms which celebrate the active nature of translation practices. The cultural turn in translation

studies helps define the field as a process which works through ideology; it also depicts translation as fully related to other modes of communication which settled ground for an encounter with feminism. As a result, we can say that translation is affected by culture through and through. “Like Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak challenges the meaning of translation within a universe of shifting borders, emphasizing the powers of translation to define and articulate otherness” (Simon 5). Thus, Feminist translation tends to recover the feminine obscured and made invisible by masculine grammar.

Feminist translation takes the challenge of questioning the very basic relations of words to objects and emotions and how it produces the mechanisms of representation. Hence, translation becomes a process which rejects fixed meanings and advocates a rewriting in which subjectivity is at work. The main term feminists concentrate on in doing translation is ‘fidelity’; as discussed earlier, this term is constantly related to the history of translation and gender since both spouses and translations are expected to be faithful and devoted. It is a common quest for both fields to reconstruct the meaning of fidelity and its association with women and translation. Another important factor in the translation process is the translating subject which has always taken a controversial stance in the world of translation especially that the field constructed a history of gender hierarchy. Thus, the stamp of the translator finds its way within the recreation of a set of discursive provisions. Feminist translators carve their way to make their identity, subjectivity, agency, and critical stance visible in their translations through their use of new vocabularies and reproduction of meaning. Therefore, the female translator determines the meaning of the text as a creative and reproductive act.

Feminist translation strategies

Translators are completely indulged in the process of transmission and highly interested in using different tools in the translation practice. As a means to make their voice heard in the target language and to voice their agency, feminists make great use of different translating strategies. Louise Von Flotow presents the following:

1. **Supplementing:** this is generally a language play method in which the translator makes creative moves on the linguistic level. Thus, it makes it easier for the female translator to set free her/his creativity which voices her agency and challenges the type of gender discriminative language others use.
2. **Preface and footnotes:** used by many feminist translators to make visible the intention of the translator to guide the reader, as it also sheds light on the process of translation itself.
3. **Hijacking:** it is the most sensitive strategy because it directs its attention towards the texts that have no feminist tendencies to correct its sexist exclusive language.

The next example shows both hijacking and prefacing techniques: Lise Gauvin writes in the preface of her translation of Susanne de Lotbiniere-Harwood *Lettre d'une Autre*, “My translation practice is a political activity aimed at making language speak for women. So my signature on a translation means: this translation has used every translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language” (9).

4. **Keeping a diary during the translation process:** it is considered a theoretical framework of the processes of translation in which the translators discuss issues and problems they encounter.

“French texts by Bersianik and Michele Causse (1989) have given Susanne de Lotbinière- Harwood the opportunity to develop a translation practice which “aims to make the feminine visible in language so that women are seen and heard in the world.” (Simon 19).

These strategies are also undertaken by women translators in translating the Quran to reflect their positions towards femininity and gender roles in Islam; they challenge notions of equivalence and faithfulness.

Gendered language in translation

“La liberation des femmes passe par le language” is a famous saying among women of the 1970s feminist movement which indicates that women must be first liberated from language. And since translation is made of language, it is considered by feminist thought to be the best field in which they can nourish language. A critique of sexism in language goes through several stages: first, it corrects the vocabulary, examines the feminine symbols in language, and gives voice to gender in language since language is the responsible of creating meaning:

“For these fields of study, language intervenes actively in the creation of meaning. Like other forms of representation, language does not simply “mirror” reality; it contributes to it. Translation, we know, refers to a process of interlinguistic transfer. Translators communicate, re-write, and manipulate a text in order to make it available to a second language public. Thus, they can use language as cultural intervention, as part of an effort to alter expressions of domination, whether at the level of concepts, of syntax or of terminology” (Simon 8).

Gender differences reside in the linguistic metaphors describing the field and its practices. The first practice in which gender is articulated has a historical context: Women were first initiated with the literary column in the European Middle Ages when they felt excluded from the authorship world. Thus, they took refuge in the discipline of translation as a form of public expression. George Eliot serves as the best example to 19th C women translators who used a male pen name so that her works can be taken seriously; she said that the reason behind her decision was to escape the ongoing stereotype that women only write light-hearted romance clichés. Second, translation was an important aspect of the feminist movement and the battle against slavery. Women conduct translation because they believe it enables them to communicate their political and literary agendas. Thus, female translation is an expression of political conviction of a long history of silenced minorities called women:

“There is an intrinsic interest in unearthing the neglected intellectual and literary work of women: in bringing to light the strong figure of the “translatress” Aphra Behn, in making heard Madame de Staël’s ringing appeal to translation as a cure for the ills of sclerotic literatures, in remembering the remarkable creative accomplishments of Constance Garnett and Jean Starr Untermeyer. The goal of this initial survey, however, is not so much to construct an archive as to suggest the kinds of interrelations upon which such genealogies might be built. Rather than provide a simple listing of women translators, this overview seeks to highlight a number of moments when translation became a strong mode of expression for women. These moments show to what extent the role

of the translator meshes with social values, and how positions in the social hierarchy are reflected in the literary field” (Simon 3).

Most feminist translators in Quebec are highly attentive to gendered language in writing that denounce the present misogyny and phallogocentric attitudes of our societies and languages especially French. These feminists saw that gendered language plays a huge role in oppressing women and promoting gender inequality. Simon argues that “Bersianik writes, in effect, to undo a linguistic system and a western philosophical tradition in which women have been continually subdued and silenced by patriarchal law and by a male-oriented grammar and lexicon that have alienated them from their own history, from meaningful patterns of self-expression, and, ultimately, from one another” (16). Women translators put emphasis on two aspects of language which act as a tool for patriarchy: grammatical gender-marking and naming strategies. The former relates to the form rather than meaning, it orders nouns according to gender, class, and hierarchy. The form is what determines how words must behave grammatically. This phenomenon manifests the idea that gender is relational, and it works as an extension to the binary opposition that constructs our thinking and way of life.

Sherry Simon asserts that “Feminism appears as yet another social and ideological stance from which Bible translation can be undertaken” (4). Translating religious texts sheds light on the interpretive task of translation, it also draws attention to the implications of gendered language in the sacred. A suggestion made by several echoes call for versions of the Bible with inclusive rather than exclusive languages which definitely promote sexism; i.e. ‘they’ is inclusive, whereas ‘he’ or ‘she’ is exclusive and discriminative in terms of gender, it also excludes the other. An example of gendered language would be Arabic which consists of gendered terms on every aspect of life. Thus, it is grammatically gendered par excellence. Laleh Bakhtiar, the latest woman who translated the Quran, believes that the Quran’s language is universal and thus makes great use of inclusive language to banish the exclusive gendered language which leads to misunderstandings. In brief, feminist translators call for an end to the offending and irrational superiority of the masculine over the feminine in language.

Reading Gender into the Quran

The Quran presents a difficult task in the face of translators because of its complex language and divine origin. Quranic Arabic, unlike modern Arabic, is a classical language that has a rich set of terminology—each word has many different meanings—which renders the translating task difficult even for native speakers. Understanding and interpreting the Quran requires knowledge of its historical and social context and the reason behind each verse’s reason of revelation. Moreover, the Quran is written in a complex poetic form which makes the translating task even more troublesome. Thus, an adequate strategy is needed to reflect the original text’s style and rhetoric. As a result, many translators are apt for a poetic form of translation, while others stick to prose. Female translators of the Quran into English being mostly Muslims accepted to remain close to the original without adding to the text; they also usually follow the order of chapters and verses. Since Arabic is a highly gendered language whereas English is not, transferring the feminine in language from Arabic to English proves to be a highly difficult mission.

Amina Wadud, an American interpreter of the Quran and scholar of Islam argues in her book *Quran and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* that Quran which is written in Arabic transcends gender distinctions to promote universal guidance. Thus, she demonstrates that the Quran surpasses gender constraints in Arabic language to convey universal principles and values:

“Although each word in Arabic is designated as masculine or feminine, it does not follow that each use of masculine or feminine persons is necessarily restricted to the mentioned gender—from the perspective of universal Qur'anic guidance. A divine text must overcome the natural restrictions of the language of human communication. Those who argue that the Qur'an cannot be translated believe that there is some necessary correlation between Arabic and the message itself. I will demonstrate that gender distinction, an inherent flaw, necessary for human communication in Arabic, is overcome by the text in order to fulfil its intention of universal guidance” (7).

Comparing Two English Translations of Surah Anissa²:

As a case study I am going to investigate and compare two English translations of the fourth chapter in the Quran ‘*Anissa*’. For this purpose, I chose Laleh Bakhtiar’s *The Sublime Quran* and Martha Shulte-Nafeh, Layth Saleh al-Shaiban and Edip Yuksel’s *The Quran: A Reformist Translation*. Both translations were published in 2007, Bakhtiar’s translation is the latest woman English translation of the Quran. In *The Quran: A Reformist Translation*, the translators made clear in the introduction that they are going to challenge the conservative and traditional translations of the Quran which they consider misleading, inaccurate, and gender biased; their goal is to let Quran’s original message of faith, equality, and peace shine. Thus, they suggest an egalitarian reading of the Quran:

“The Quran: A Reformist Translation offers a non-sexist understanding of the divine text; it is the result of collaboration between three translators, two men and a woman. We use logic and the language of the Quran itself as the ultimate authority in determining likely meanings, rather than previous scholarly interpretations. These interpretations, though sometimes useful as historical and scholarly reference resources, are frequently rendered inadequate for a modern understanding and practice of Islam because they were heavily influenced by patriarchal culture, relied heavily on the hearsay teachings falsely attributed to the Prophet Mohammed, and were frequently driven by hidden or overt sectarian and political agendas. We therefore explicitly reject the right of the clergy to determine the likely meaning of disputed passages” (11).

Laleh Bakhtiar on the other hand devotes her time to the history of Muslim women. Thus, she asserts men and women an equal position in the Quran; her translation is the first critical one made by a woman. She argues that the history of Islam treated women unequally to men. Hence, she hopes that her translation would fix the misconceptions and contribute to a better understanding. She also promotes an egalitarian voice in interpreting the Quran. This egalitarian voice is explicit in both translations of *Surah Anissa* and its controversial verses that circle around matters of women.

Chapter four in the Quran contains four controversial terms: 1. “*Wa Ma malakt aymanokom*”: it is normally translated as ‘those whom your right hands possess’ and it is used to refer to women slaves owned by men. It was translated by Bakhtiar as ‘what your right hands possessed’ which is also how it is likely translated and it is considered literal translation which reflects the term’s unintelligibility and untranslatability. However, it is translated in *The Quran*:

² *Surah Anissa* is the fourth chapter of the Quran and it has a hundred and seventy-six verses. *Anissa* translates into women and it is the chapter in the Quran that speaks mostly about women.

A Reformist translation as ‘those with whom you have contractual rights’ which refers to women who are married to men of other religions that were in war with Muslims then they run from their husbands and seek refuge in the Muslim community without proper divorce, thus they make contracts that allow them to marry Muslims. 2. *Qawamouna* is usually translated as ‘maintainers’ indicating that the women should live under their husbands’ care and protection. It is translated in both translations as supporters or to support which explains that they all understood the verse as an order from God to men to support their women economically and financially not that men are stronger or superior than women. Nafeh, Al-Shaikhan and Yuksel declare that translating the word *Qawamouna* by many translators as ‘in charge of women’ imprints their justification of their misogynist and patriarchal orientations. They argue that what is more striking about those translators is that they translate the same word in another verse as ‘observe’; it is only translated in terms of hierarchy and authority when it refers to the relationship between men and women. 3. *Nushuzahona*: It is translated in most translations as ‘rebellion’. On the one hand, it is translated by Bakhtiar as ‘resistance’ because she sees it as a form of women’s resistance to their husband’s forms of oppression. On the other, in the second translation it is translated as disloyalty which indicates a form of disloyalty and infidelity rather than disobedience. 4. *Wa Idribohona*: It is normally translated as ‘beat them or strike them’ referring to women but it is translated in both the translations I am discussing as ‘to go away from’. Bakhtiar argues that since the Quran sees marriage as a moral act and divorce as immoral, and orders men to divorce women without harming them, suggests that there is no possibility that the word ‘*Daraba*’ would mean to strike or to beat. Moreover, she believes that since there are 26 meanings for the verb ‘*Daraba*’ in Arabic, we should follow what the prophet Muhammed did, which is to go away from his wives in situations of argument or misunderstanding.

The difference noticed between the two translations is that first, in *The Quran: A Reformist translation*, there is a lack of coherence between sentences mainly because of its weak use of linking and transition words. Second, Bakhtiar’s translation makes use of a gendered strategy of using (F) when referring to females to avoid gender confusability since English, unlike Arabic, is a gender-neutral language. Third, in *The Quran: A Reformist translation* there is an extensive use of endnotes unlike Bakhtiar’s translation. In addition, I noticed in both translations an extensive use of punctuation although the original text does not make use of any. Moreover, both translations include prefaces in which the translators explain the strategies used, clarify their intentions, and express their choices. These modern translations of the Quran serve as a new reading of the sacred scriptures that is gender friendly and supports God’s universal message of love, compassion, and peace.

Conclusion

Benjamin states, “One can demonstrate that no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original” (Benjamin 256). In short, translation aims at solving problems rather than emphasizing the duality of original and translation. The translator creates a space of in-betweens which negotiates linguistic and cultural emphasis on difference. Therefore, translation is not dependent on any other form of writing; it is a process of meaning recreation rather than just translating words from source to target language. Women and translation share a similar history of oppression and subordination; thus, feminists easily identify themselves with translation and find a home in the translation discipline because it permits them to make use of language to fight against gendered language itself and how it contributes to creating patriarchy and gender abuse. One of the most important female translators’ contributions to the field is their translations of the sacred; they tend to read gender in religion by using several strategies which allow them to deconstruct relations of hierarchy and authority in language and reform our interpretations of the sacred.

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