

# Criticisms of Feminist Translation Theory from outside Feminism

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

## 1. Introduction

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

## 2. Criticism from outside Feminism

Criticism from outside feminism is directed at feminist theories which are "too emotional, too partisan, and too ideological, in fact, too subjective for real scholarship" [1].

### 2.1 Over-emphasis on the Translator's Intervention

Scholars who emphasize "universality" and "objectivity" think that feminist translation theory is too radical because of its overdue emphasis on the intervention of the translator. Feminists claim that translation is the best way to assert female identity politics and that the translator can rewrite, create and distort the original texts to achieve their political purpose. Levine observes that translation is a more advanced stage of writing [1]. Godard points out, "The feminist translator, affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text. *Womanhandling* the text in translation would involve the replacement of the modest-self-effacing translator" [2]. On this theoretical basis, feminists have carried out many bold translation practices. However, their over-emphasis on the translator's intervention makes their theory and practices turn out to be the other extreme. The difference between the writer and the

translator has been exaggerated, thus forming a new kind of inequality. No wonder many scholars have called for paying attention to and respecting the author again.

Moreover, feminist translator reframes the question of “fidelity”, which has played like a stultifying refrain through the history of translation [2]. For feminist translation, fidelity is to be directed toward neither the author nor the reader, but toward the writing project – a project in which both writer and translator participate [2]. If this method is employed in translation practices, it is possible to give excuses for mistranslation, or even threaten the existence of translation as a profession. And work that addresses gender issues may not be published or disseminated and scholars who work in this area may be marginalized and rendered uncertain.

## 2.2 Over-emphasis on the Influence of Sexual Difference upon Translation

In her article “Language and Sexual Difference: the Case of Translation” (1984), Godard states that female physiology and experience determine their unique perspective, way of thinking, theme and writing style, which are different from those of men’s [3]. In other words, women’s works bear strong female consciousness. Now this may posit a question like this: when translating women’s works, especially feminists’ works, what may be the differences between such two versions, one is done by male, the other by female? Of course, the same work may take on many looks when it is translated by different people. If the same feminist work is translated by a male and a female, there will be some differences between these two versions. This is because male translators and female translators have different physiological and psychological characteristics and experiences. These differences will be explained in the following part.

### 2.2.1 Female Translators Having a More Systematical Exploration of Physiological Words

Feminists think that female translators will definitely have a more systematical exploration of physiological words than male, because they have a more direct and correct understanding of the female body and female physiological knowledge. This is true. As far as we are concerned, one of the main goals held by feminists is to explore “the wild zone” exclusive to women. “The wild zone”, named by Elaine Showalter, means that female repossesses the word and describes their body with their own inner feelings for the first time. These efforts made by feminists undoubtedly pose new requirements for translation. Compared with male, female translators, when translating feminists’ works, are more conscious of exploring the words concerning their own body. Take the famous line from a Quebecois play named *La nef des sorcières* (1976) as an example:

*Ce soir, J’entre dans l’histoire sans relever ma jupe.*

David Ellis, a male translator, translated this sentence like this: *this evening, I’m entering history without pulling up my skirt*. Landa Gaborian, a female translator, translated it like this: *This evening, I’m entering history without opening up my legs*. Feminists herein think that Ellis’s rendering is worse and less creative than Gaborian’s because he lacks the clear understanding of female sexual experience, which makes him unable to explain the meanings beyond the text. Instead, Gaborian’s version is the best description of female body, creating a female image with her own feelings. This version is thus considered to be in line with feminist requirements – “to explore the wild zone”, in other words, to rewrite the original text in a feminist way. Based on these comments, it is easy to summarize the translation standards held by feminists like this: 1) those translations in line with feminist requirements are good translations; 2) the task of the translator is to explore the connotations beyond the original text according to their own standpoint; 3) fidelity is no longer the highest standard for translation. In this case, every school of translation studies, by their own standpoints, explains the original text instead of faithfully reproducing it, then what standards should be adopted in translation?

### 2.2.2 Male Translators Having an Inclination to Subjugate Female

Although the translator, either male or female, is restricted to the original text, their outlooks shall be revealed consciously or unconsciously in the process of translation and even mixed with the translated text. Feminists herein assume that male translators have an inclination to subjugate female under the control of patriarchy. Thus when they are translating works of women writers, they often consciously or unconsciously suppress or belittle female characters in the original texts. Quote an example from Godard’s essay “Language and Sexual Difference: The Case of Translation”. A male

translator literally translated the original poetry “En quel songe/ Cette enfant fut-elle liée par la cheville/ Pareille à une esclave fascinée?” into “In what dream/ Was this child tied by the ankle/ Like a fascinated slave?” [3]. Godard states that the child in the poem is apparently a girl, but the male translator ignores this fact and does not point it out directly in his translation. If he is not out of his discrimination against female, how could he make such a mistake? Godard just quotes some lines from this version of the poem and herein asserts that this male translator has sexual discrimination against women for he has not translated out “she” or “her”. This may be too extreme. It is important that we should depend on the whole context to understand a word, a phrase, a sentence as well as a paragraph. The male translator does not mark clearly “she” or “her” in his translation, yet we can still figure out from the context that the child is a girl.

It is unfair to put the so-called “sexual discrimination” label on male translators just because of their mistranslation or failure to translate some words out. If the poem mentioned above was done by a female translator, then how would feminists comment on this? Some feminists like Godard tend to suggest that women’s texts should be translated by women translators; however, they do not recognize the fact that not all women translators are feminists. If this is the case, then they can only faithfully reproduce the original from an ordinary translator’s perspective instead of rewriting it in a feminist way.

This is not to say that we do not acknowledge the influence of sexual difference exerting upon translation. The famous linguist Robin Lakoff writes in his work *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975) that woman’s language is more shilly-shally [3]. This certainly has some relationship with their lower social status. George Steiner also points out that women’s semantic schema and expressions are quite different from men’s and that the characteristics of women’s language are determined by the social, economic and political conditions imposed upon them [3]. Despite this, it is quite necessary for a translator to rewrite the original image and reproduce the original meanings by using a brand-new feminine language?

### 2.3 Over-emphasis on the Manipulation over Language

Many radical feminists view the current language as an important cause of women’s oppression because it is the medium through which women have been taught their subordinate place in the world. This patriarchal language needs to be reformed or, if possible, completely replaced by a new and more feminine language. Thus they have started attacking language itself rather than the messages carried by language. Writers have tried out new words, new spellings and new grammatical structures in an attempt to move beyond the conventions of patriarchal language – the language forged and used by the institutions in society largely ruled by men.

However, many scholars propose that it lacks theoretical grounds to attribute sexual discrimination to language; it is not necessary for feminist translators to place too much importance on the manipulation over language. For example, are the words such as “man-slaughter” or “man-trap” still representing pallogocentrism? In 1995, Eugene Nida wrote a short text raising the issue of “gender neutrality” as a more serious response to feminist initiatives in Bible translations. According to his view, work that highlights socio-cultural or political inequalities and ascribes them to gender difference seeks to achieve gender neutrality. However, since most living creatures are of either female or male sex, “there are no cognitive models to form a basis for understanding such gender neutrality” [4]. Biological sexual difference is thus seen to make gender a given that must be recognized and expressed in language, and that cannot be linguistically transgressed [4]. The “inclusive” language in Bible translations is “no really valid solution to the issue of gender neutrality” [4], and only radical change within the Christian church will lead to changes in the inequitable roles assigned to women and men in the church.

Undoubtedly, every language reflects the prejudices of the society in which it evolved. Since English, through most of its history, evolved in a white, Anglo-Saxon, patriarchal society, no one should be surprised that its vocabulary and grammar frequently reflect attitudes that exclude or demean women. A sizeable number of people would like to do something to eliminate these inherited linguistic biases. But getting rid of them involves more than just exposing them and putting forward

alternatives. It requires change, and linguistic change is not easier to accept than any other kind. It may even be harder. For example, ever since the eighteenth century, to resolve the question of “masculine pronouns” in English referring to both male and female, a large number of grammarians, rhetoricians and sociologists like Joseph Priestley, Samuel Ramsey, Otto Jespersen and Paul B. Horton put forward many proposals. They used “they, them, their” to replace “he/she, him/her, his/hers” [5][6]. However, these words have not been accepted by the society. This may be the same case with feminist innovative practices. Whether feminists’ approaches can be accepted by the society still needs the proof-test of time.

Feminists regard language as a cause of oppression, rather than as a symbol. Actually language itself and literary forms cannot be the sole objective of reform. This is because language, established by usage, has a deep-rooted sexual discrimination. Only the social change can bring forth a real language reform. If the current situation of women has not been changed at all, it will be a naïve assumption to only correct the historical falsehood long existing in language. From the linguistic angle, there are sex-related differences in language use, however, pure feminist discourse and feminist literary forms cannot stand at their own, but may give to readers the illusion of replicating feminist literary forms by taking masculine standards. Although there are some differences in terms of contents, feminist texts are rather scholastic and still full of male characteristics.

### 3. Summary

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

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