

The Practical Dilemma of Feminist Translation Theory: A Critical Reflection from Deconstruction to Reconstruction

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ABSTRACT

Based on deconstructionism, feminist translation theory aims to question the logocentric and gender-invisible nature of traditional translation theories by foregrounding translator subjectivity and gender intervention. But its anti-empiricist theoretical background and the inclination towards excessive strategic manipulation in the process of translation have undermined linguistic normativity and communicative role of translation. In the globalization context, the theory has become more niche and elitist, which makes it hard to explain the various types of oppression that women translators in the Global South face. This demonstrates a certain logic of discursive re-disciplining and an intrinsic theoretical paradox, which necessitates revision of paradigms and reconstruction of strategies in a cross-cultural approach.

Keywords: *Feminist translation theory, Translator subjectivity, Deconstruction, Theoretical reflection.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminist translation theory has emerged with the emergence of the second-wave feminist movement and quickly evolved into a major branch of Translation Studies. The theory prefigures the subjectivity of the translator and promotes the strategies of rewriting (*supplementing, prefacing*—with the help of adding prefaces and footnotes, *hijacking*) to achieve the creative treason of the translator, confront the traditional patriarchal discourse, and redefine the agency of women in language and culture. Such scholars as Sherry Simon and Luise von Flotow presented such powerful ideas as translator visibility and reconstruction of women language, which helped to make the Cultural Turn in Translation Studies and became an important step towards the radical change in the theoretical discussion of the field. The introduction of feminist translation theory to China started in the first half of the twenty-first century and took a gradual course of theoretical translation and critical review to localized theoretical construction and practice. Liao Qiyi (2000) was one of the earliest Chinese researchers who addressed how feminism affected

translation, whereas Xu Baoqiang and Yuan Wei (2001) brought to the attention of Chinese readers the influential essay by Simon *Gender in Translation*. Later on, other theorists like Chen Lin (2004) and Chen Yongguo (2005) did additional theoretical studies and spread feminist translation ideology. Based on these ground-breaking works, Chinese scholarship developed feminist translation studies in various directions, such as feminist understandings of translation functions (Liao, 2002), reconceptualization of the nature of translation (Ge, 2003), systematic investigations of the effects of feminism on translation theory (Jiang, 2004), comparative studies of Chinese and Western discourses and metaphorical systems (Liu, 2004). These works all expanded the scope and depth of feminist translation studies in China, both theoretically and disciplinarily. According to Tan Sirong (2010), the history of feminist translation theory in China can be broadly divided into three phases: theoretical introduction, practical application, and interdisciplinary integration. This trend is not only an active interaction with Western feminist theories but also their re-creation and adaptation to the Chinese culture. However, since its foundation, feminist translation theory has been

firmly rooted in the postmodernist theory. Its basic orientation is to challenge hegemonic discourses, disrupt the existing power relations, break binary oppositions, and critically deconstruct logocentrism that underlies the traditional translation theory, thus having a clearly critical and subversive nature.

Due to its radical orientation and the limitations of this theory, feminist translation theory has been a subject of much criticism as well. According to the Brazilian feminist critic Rosemary Arrojo, feminist translation theory is doomed to destroy itself due to its theoretical opportunism, contradictions within itself, hypocrisy, and theoretical incoherence (Arrojo, 1995). Ge Xiaoqin (2003) argues that feminist translation theory is inclined to overcorrect historical gender imbalance by overly glorifying the experience of women, sometimes even reaching the sphere of erotic writing. She also notes that its heavy reliance on such strongly confrontational language as deprivation, appropriation, and hijacking, runs the risk of establishing a new binary opposition, as do contradictions between its suggested strategies of translation and their practical implications. In *The Subversion of Traditional Translation Theory by Feminism and Its Limitations*, Zhang Jinghua (2004) states that, since feminist schools are so diverse and tend to be overly radical, they consider the subversion of traditional translation theory based on structuralism as an ultimate goal, give priority to irrationality over rationality, and, in the name of political objectives, put too much emphasis on linguistic manipulation and translator intervention. As a result, feminist translation theory leaves behind, and in some cases, perverts the very essence of translation, thus inevitably exposing itself to a lot of criticism. Based on the Chinese-English translation practice of Eileen Chang, Wang Xiaoying (2015) also indicates that current feminist translation theory demonstrates its shortcomings when it comes to dealing with translations created by Third World and women translators of color, especially in terms of its implicit whiteness and elitist orientation. Similarly, in her feminist re-evaluation of the theory of untranslatability, He Jing (2015) admits the beneficial impact of feminist translation theory on deconstructing conventional understandings of translation but warns that its practical implementation can lead to excessive intervention of the source text by the translator.

Without a doubt, feminist translation theory, as a form of political praxis, has contributed greatly to the progress of women in terms of democratic rights and discursive position as well as bringing

some new valuable insights into Translation Studies. But when it is considered as a disciplinary theory in the strict sense its natural limitations cannot be disregarded. Its theoretical system shows strong tendencies towards emotionalization, factionalism, ideological orientation, antagonism, politicization and subjectivism which do not contribute to its scientific rigor and universal explanatory power. Feminist translation theory as a disciplinary paradigm does not have a solid base upon which systematic theory building can be done. Simply put, it is a theoretical construct that has internal shortcomings and contradictions to the extent that it cannot offer a scientifically based explanation of the phenomena of translation or a rational basis on which translation practice should be conducted.

2. THEORETICAL DILEMMA OF DECONSTRUCTIONIST TRANSLATION THEORY

Feminist translation theory is a postmodern theory of translation, which is philosophically based on the theory of deconstruction by Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction denies that there is a fixed center of meaning and challenges the possibility of stable correspondence between language and reality. It aims to subvert the status quo of meaning and dominant discourses by revealing the binary oppositions and power relations inherent in texts and dismantling them. In Marxist philosophy, however, the basic premises of deconstruction are both logically inconsistent and impractical. Consequently, the validity of deconstruction as the philosophical basis of feminist translation theory can be questioned.

The idea of *différance* by Derrida is at the centre of deconstruction and it substitutes the ontological underpinnings with an infinite act of difference and deferral. In this perception, language can never be completely referential to an objective world since meaning is always deferred and constantly produced in relations of difference. This stance goes against the Marxist conception that the material world is objective, exists outside human consciousness and that language as a product of social practice is a tool by which human beings perceive, represent and change objective reality. The denial of the stable relationship between language and the external world by deconstruction undermines the relationship between language, cognition and reality, thus, undermining the epistemological foundation on which theoretical inquiry is based.

Deconstruction is also characterized by being critical and not constructive. According to Derrida, no meaning can be freed out of the chain of differences and reach final validation (Derrida, 1967). Conversely, Marxist philosophy argues that theory must not merely explain the world in a scientific manner but must also give direction to social practice (Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*). When all centers, authorities, and systems of theory turn into the object of deconstruction, then even theory itself ceases to have any chance of creating some stable explanatory framework. Unlimited deconstruction ends up in unlimited negation. This self-reflexive paradox renders deconstruction hard to provide a consistent theoretical framework that can be used to explain or change reality, thus undermining its pretensions to scientific validity.

In Derrida's theory of *différance*, the meaning of the source text is not given in the text but is determined by its differences with other texts. Given the infinite nature of these relations of difference, both synchronically and diachronically, textual meaning is thus necessarily open, unstable and always under construction. Thus, for Derrida, language is not a closed system but an open network. Meaning is perpetually disseminated and deferred, leaving only the dynamic trace, through which meaning experiences a "regulated transformation" (Derrida, 1981). If meaning can never be fixed, however, the conventional idea of faithfulness in translation inevitably falls to pieces, and even the very possibility of translation comes into question. So it is natural to wonder what kind of practical advice such a highly theoretical approach can offer for translation in particular cultural settings.

In line with the logic of *différance*, meaning of the source text is created in relation to the other, which includes translated texts and other discourses, instead of being independent. As a result, the source text ceases to hold a privileged position as compared to the translation. The traditional hierarchical connection between source and target text, in which the former defines the latter, is substituted by a dependency relationship. The original text must be translated in order to circulate outside its original linguistic and cultural framework and, in the sense of Walter Benjamin, to have its *afterlife*; translation is thus perceived not merely as an extension of the original text but as a precondition of its further life. By doing so, the conventional authority of the source text is essentially put into question.

Based on this philosophical context, feminist translation theory extends the analogy between the relationship of source text and translation to that of men and women. It maintains that in the same way that the masculine cannot exist without the feminine as its other, the source text cannot exist outside translation. Focusing on translator subjectivity, challenging dominant discourse, and rejecting traditional models of translation, feminist translation theory inherits the larger skepticism of fixed linguistic meaning and stable textual authority of deconstruction. With the theoretical plausibility of deconstruction itself becoming dubious, however, the philosophical foundations of feminist translation theory are bound to be undermined, and its validity as a separate theoretical paradigm is also hard to maintain.

There are also a number of tensions within feminist translation theory that stem from its dependence on Derrida's notion of *différance*. With the certainty of textual meaning undermined, the old principle of fidelity is also rejected. The original text is seen as just one node in an infinite network of differences and the translator's intervention is not only allowed but even warranted. In this context, more and more emphasis is put on the cultural and political background of the translator. Feminist translation assumes that translators inevitably bring to texts certain structures of *pre-knowledge*, which are shaped by historical ideology and gender politics. In their efforts to reconstruct female subjectivity, feminist translators strategically intervene in and re-write the source text in line with feminist principles, thus transforming translation into a cultural and political act. This view of translation extends the socio-cultural dimension of Translation Studies, but it also runs the risk of turning translation into a tool of political activism, and therefore undermines the disciplinary integrity and academic objectivity of Translation Studies as a discipline.

Even more essentially, since this stance is based on the deconstructionist denial of objective textual meaning, it falls into a theoretical dilemma in a circle. Theoretical consistency and explanatory power are bound to be sacrificed when academic argument is made to be subordinate to political commitment. This brings with it some questions that need to be given due consideration. To what extent should the Cultural Turn in Translation Studies go? Is it possible to transcend language and culture in translation research without losing its disciplinary basis? Are all the Western theories of translation to be presented and promoted without

proper attention to their cultural appropriateness and practicality? Lastly, can a theory of translation which provides little direction to the actual practice of translation really meet the demands of the field?

3. THE OVERINDULGENCES OF FEMINIST TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

Although feminist translation theory adopts deconstruction as its theoretical starting point, its practical implementation is marked by the intentional intervention in both meaning and linguistic structure of the source text. Feminist translators tend to defend such intervention on political grounds, using strategies like *supplementing*, *prefacing* and *hijacking* to challenge gendered metaphors and patriarchal discourse that are entrenched in the original. Practically, however, these strategies often change the linguistic structure and semantic integrity of the text undermining linguistic norms and translational rationality. The outcome is usually an overcorrection which cannot be reasonably accommodated by translation as a communicative activity.

Intervention in grammatical conventions is one of the expressions of this trend. Feminist translation goes out of its way to go against the linguistic norms that have been set in place as a way of ensuring women are not invisible in language. An example is Sherry Simon, who proposes what she calls a *feminized language*, where translators should add more gender markers, create explicitly feminine lexical forms, or use consciously marked phrases to counteract the so-called masculine neutrality of traditional language (Simon, 1996). Common ones are substituting author with **authoress** or **auther**, history with **herstory**, translator with **translatress**, or replacing all gender-neutral pronouns with feminine ones. Even though these practices certainly enhance the visibility of women on the lexical level, they also deprive language of the conciseness and neutrality that it usually strives to attain. The resultant writings tend to be overly bulky, disrupting the natural communication process and diminishing stylistic fluency.

Another issue is that the quest to have explicit gender marking tends to take the translation away out of the linguistic norms of the target language and thus it becomes less acceptable and less readable to its target audience. One such example is the English translation of works by the French

feminist writer Nicole Brossard by Barbara Godard. Translating the French phrase *les écrivains*, which does not specify the sex of the writers, Godard translates it as female writers (Godard, 1989), and makes a conscious effort to introduce a gender difference that was not present in the original. This translation evidently shows the feminist commitment of the translator, yet it also reduces the semantic openness of the original text and transforms its authorial intention. More to the point, when it comes to female writers who are supposed to eradicate masculine bias, then one can quite rightly inquire how the element **male** which is built into the very word **female** is to be eliminated. These examples show the practical boundaries of linguistic engineering in the quest to achieve ideological objectives.

In a broader sense, feminist translation lays such an emphasis on gender politics that the basic tenets of fidelity and communicative effectiveness are driven to the periphery. The intervention of translators slowly supersedes textual interpretation, with more space to subjective rewriting than faithful representation.

The same can be said of the reconstruction of textual meaning. When talking about how feminist translation theory was received in China, Chen Lin (2004) notes that certain feminist translators tend to omit, rearrange or even re-interpret texts to prefigure feminist awareness. Consequently, the translated text can be far off the source. These practices obscure the line between translation and rewriting, interpretation and authorship. Translation therefore runs the risk of being a tool of promoting ideological standpoints instead of a means of intercultural communication.

4. THE REGIONAL AND UNSCIENTIFIC NATURE OF ITS CULTURAL ORIGINS

Feminist translation theory, as one of the key branches of postmodern translation theory, is based not only on Western philosophy (particularly deconstruction) but also, at a more cultural level, on new interpretations of *the Bible* and Greek mythology. Of these, *the Tower of Babel* story has emerged as a central metaphor by which feminist translation theorists have described linguistic diversity, identity formation and the very nature of translation itself. The appropriation and re-interpretation of the Babel narrative by feminist translation theory is, in its own way, a re-creation

of a cultural motif that has its roots in the Western religious tradition.

Genesis (Chapter 11) tells us that following the Flood, mankind tried to construct a tower to heaven so as to show its own strength. God retaliated by confusing human speech and dispersing people throughout the earth, thus they could not communicate with each other. The feminist translation theorists, especially Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993), see this story as a metaphor of how linguistic fragmentation came about and why it is impossible to have a single meaning. Translation is consequently perceived as a needed yet an incomplete task—an endless quest of the lost pure language, a cultural compensatory and restorative act.

In the context of archaeology and history, however, the Babel story cannot be confirmed as a historical fact. Though there are several excavated stepped temple towers in ancient Mesopotamia such as Etemenanki in Babylon, none can be definitely said to be the Tower of Babel that is mentioned in the biblical text. The tale can be interpreted as a religious allegory that describes the linguistic diversity and demonstrates what happens when one attempts to defy the divine authority. An imaginary story which lacks solid historical facts can scarcely serve as a satisfactory basis of a scientific theory. When the fundamental reasoning behind a translation theory is based on a cultural myth that has not been historically verified and universally validated, it is only natural that questions would arise both with regard to its theoretical soundness and its broader applicability.

The Babel story is also culturally specific, which restricts its explanatory power. Being a tale with Jewish and Christian backgrounds, it falls into a purely Western religious world picture and has not held the same cultural status in other civilizations. These distinctions indicate that the linguistic philosophy of feminist translation theory is constructed on assumptions that are firmly rooted in a specific Western religious tradition as opposed to principles that have cross-cultural appeal. Such assumptions can be easily turned into an aspect of theoretical universalization when applied to non-Western settings, which disregards the variety of local intellectual traditions and cultural experiences.

In terms of methodology, the development of theory based on mythological accounts, without empirical evidence and logical proof, is not in line with the usual expectations of scientific practice. Typically, scientific theories are developed from

observation, evidence and rational argumentation, rather than through symbolic stories and cultural metaphors. Feminist translation theory has certainly highlighted important concerns such as linguistic diversity and translator subjectivity. But it often tends to rely heavily on metaphorical and symbolic thinking. To some degree, this renders its theoretical discourse highly interpretive and symbolic. More significantly, it extrapolates from the cultural background of a particular civilization to account for translation in general, which runs the risk of overgeneralization and undermines both the internal consistency of the theory and its cross-cultural applicability.

5. MARGINALIZATION AND ELITISM: THE NATURAL DEFICIENCIES OF FEMINIST TRANSLATION THEORY AND THE NECESSITY OF THEORETICAL REVISION

Since its establishment, feminist translation theory has aimed at breaking the hegemony of patriarchal discourse and empowering female translators. However, with the evolution of the theory, its shortcomings have become more evident, especially its marginalization and elitism tendencies. On the one hand, feminist translation theory prefigures the agency of the translator and urges translators to recreate the voice of women by means of translation. Conversely, it has not given enough consideration to the diversity of experiences of women or to the various historical and social contexts in which women exist. Consequently, its theoretical framework has been unable to adapt to the realities of more marginalized groups such as women in the Global South and women of color.

The majority of the most prominent proponents of feminist translation theory have been white Western scholars. Their advocated strategies of translation, including supplementation, marking and intentional rewriting, have certainly posed a challenge to the traditional concept of the invisible translator. Simultaneously, these strategies always contain assumptions that are influenced by certain cultural and intellectual traditions. Practically, they are inclined to generalize the experience of white, middle-class Western women and not pay enough attention to the various types of oppression suffered by women of different cultures, social classes, and ethnic groups. As a result, feminist translation theory loses its explanatory force when it is used outside its original cultural context, particularly in

translating literature of the Global South. It can even generate new discursive dominance or cultural appropriation in some instances.

Another inconsistency in the theory is at the practice level. It calls for translators to intervene in the source text, but this intervention may have different implications depending on the translator's identity. If translators themselves belong to marginalised social or cultural groups, for example, massive intervention does not necessarily amplify their voices; it might even obfuscate or distort their cultural reality. For women translators from the Global South working with texts that are legacies of colonialism, gender is not everything. They often face the compounded issues of gender, race, culture and colonial histories. In such cases, conventional feminist approaches to translation are not enough to deal with these complexities. The disconnect between the universality of the theory and the variety of translation situations suggests a need to consider the interplay between the general and the historical.

Another weakness is the lack of historical and social context. Since feminist translation theory tends to focus on gender as opposed to other contextual aspects, its use in cross-cultural contexts can have the unintended effect of recreating the same types of cultural domination that it is trying to oppose. By questioning patriarchal authority, it occasionally substitutes one discourse of dominance with another leaving little room to non-Western women translators to make meaning according to their own conditions. This not only undermines its critical power but also its initial dedication to giving voice to women instead of speaking on their behalf.

The feminist translation theory has certainly helped in the evolution of Translation Studies by bringing new questions and new outlooks. Simultaneously, its own evolution has demonstrated the danger of shifting to the contrary of its initial ambitions. With the context of globalization, women experiences are becoming more diversified and various types of inequality are intertwined more than ever before. These developments demand a re-theorization of feminist translation theory itself.

The historical specificity and cultural context should be more considered in future studies as women translators in various societies negotiate different types of power and have different types of agency. Their experiences cannot be compared to one theoretical criterion. Meanwhile, feminist

translation theory could use some more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to translation. More openness to challenging its own premises, interaction with other intellectual traditions, and re-evaluating its conceptual underpinnings would allow the theory to refresh itself by means of critical reflection and better address the evolving challenges posed by women translators and translated texts in a progressively interconnected world.

6. CONCLUSION

Feminist translation theory has emerged as a politically active approach to Translation Studies since its inception in the late twentieth century. It has expanded the theoretical horizons and the discursive space of the discipline by challenging patriarchal discourse, foregrounding translator agency, and facilitating the cultural turn in research on translation. Meanwhile, at the same time, its evolution has revealed several weaknesses that have not been resolved yet. They are the instability of its philosophical underpinnings, the propensity of certain of its translation strategies to go too far in practice, the lack of scientific and cross-cultural validity of its cultural assumptions, and an ever more obvious tendency towards elitism and theoretical exclusiveness.

These problems were discussed in four interrelated dimensions. To begin with, the deconstructionist premises of feminist translation theory were revealed to have built-in logical tensions and thus compromised the theoretical integrity of its framework. Second, interventionist translation practices that seek to transform language, textual meaning, and gender relations were claimed to be potentially disruptive to the equilibrium between agency and faithfulness to the original text on the part of the translator. Third, the fact that the theory was based on Western religious mythology as its symbolic and philosophical basis was discovered to limit its explanatory capacity when applied to non-Western situations. Lastly, growing trends towards elitism, marginalization, and theoretical self-enclosure were also noted as some of the key issues accompanying the development of the theory in a global context.

Feminist translation as a type of resistant translation practice has certainly helped in the evolution of Translation Studies. As an overall theoretical approach to explaining the phenomena of translation and informing the practice of translation, however, its explanatory range and

analytical framework are open to additional critical consideration and systematic improvement.

The future of feminist translation theory needs to go beyond the limitations of western centrism and identity politics through a closer consideration of historical context, translation practice, and cross-cultural applicability. Gender justice is still a significant goal that should not be neglected but it must be complemented with academic rigour, professional integrity, objectivity, and cultural diversity which characterize translation as a linguistic practice as well as a form of intercultural mediation. It is only in this reorientation that the feminist translation theory can achieve a more fruitful balance between political commitment and scholarly inquiry whereby it can develop into a more constructive, intellectually coherent, and theoretically sustainable paradigm.

AUTHORS' INTRODUCTION

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