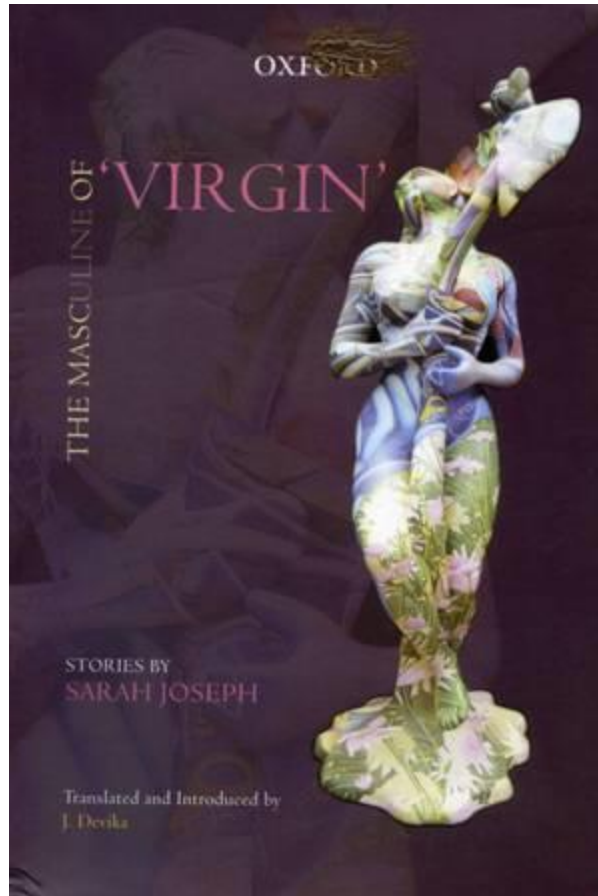


Re-Birthing: Women Translating Women

Elizabeth Mathew and Keerthana K. S.



Abstract

The research paper is an attempt to analyse the translation of feminist fictional literature into English by women, focusing on select short stories of Sarah Joseph translated into English by J Devika. The problematic of gender representations and translatability were key concerns since the origin of translation practice, which feminist translators and theoreticians are now critiquing through their practice. The present study seeks to explore how feminist translation practices invent, intervene and interact with the text, languages and cultures in the transposition of explicitly feminist content to the target literary polysystem. It is also necessary to focus on the linguistic hegemony in translating from a third world language to a global language. The study follows an interdisciplinary approach, drawing inputs from translation studies, gender studies and linguistics.

Language and Literature

Language and literature reflects the social, cultural and political realities of the time and society it represents. These values operate at multiple levels in translations, and the practical and theoretical works in the discipline are no exception to this. From the times of the emergence of the practice, translation has been identified with the female body, sharing the sexist and derogatory attitudes prevalent in the society towards both women and translations. The violent and forced equations followed from the theological deliberations regarding the hermeneutics of translation and notions of patriarchal social order together contributed to this flawed and biased views that in part formed the ideals of translation in the early ages.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics view advocated the word as divine and author as supreme authority whereas the translator is but a non-entity, a carrier who can only make a distant reproduction of the original in the translation. The religious patriarchy viewed women as flawed versions, derivational subjects, and inferior to men. This sanctified the associating of translation with women. This led to translation being seen in gendered terms, being described by metaphors of rape, fidelity and reproduction, an act equally violent to the female body as well as to the practice of translation.

Feminist Translation Approaches

Feminist theoreticians of translation approach these with suspicion. According to Lori Chamberlain, "...the reason translation is so over coded, so over regulated, is that it threatens to erase the difference between production and reproduction, which is essential to the establishment of power." (Cited in Simon, 1996:8) They sought to identify power as the reason for regulating both translations as well as the female body. The narratives invented to regulate the female in both private and public spheres were imposed on translation as well. A woman writing was deemed banal for ages citing her derivational status. At a time when women were considered incapable of creative production, many women undertook translations to vent out their creative aches and some translated to revolt.

Translation Studies opened itself to the feminist turn in the 1990s. However, the practice of translation and feminism were already overlapping and inseparably combined since the middle of the twentieth century, in connection to feminist movements. Through 1970s and 80s, feminists found translations a suitable tool to undo the historical wrongs propagated by the patriarchy. They perceived that the liberation of women must follow from their liberation from the grips of the language of patriarchy.¹ The solution was to rework language to find a space for women to express themselves. The feminist translation projects they undertook were aimed at uncovering writings by forgotten women writers and record their role in literature and history, altering the sexist nature of classic texts through inclusive language and expose the sexism inherent in language and literature.

The history of the discussions surrounding equivalence and fidelity in translation is decidedly chauvinistic. The notorious "*les belles infideles*" (beautiful, infidel woman) (Cited in Simon: 10) was a celebrated tag corresponding to the practice of translation. Susane de Lotbiniere-Harwood's claim "I am a translation, because I am a woman" (Cited in Simon, 1996:1) depicts the rebellious asserting attitudes of feminist translators at the face of patriarchy. Fidelity

was questioned by many woman translators, some of them claiming that fidelity to the work is not necessary for a translation. The translation is seen as an independent work on its own and not a derivational entity. Feminist translation fixed the debate over fidelity on the purpose by insisting that fidelity in translation must be fixed to the translation project and not otherwise.

Different Translation Strategies

The feminist translators employed different translation strategies/ techniques to serve the purpose of the translation project. While critical disagreements to feminist translation practices complained that the work is not preserved when the focus is shifted elsewhere, feminist translators disregarded it, advocating greater visibility and inclusiveness as a political concern. De Lotbiniere-Harwood states that “my translation practice is a political activity aimed at language speaking for women. So, my signature on a translation means: this translation has used every translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language.” (Cited in von Flowtow, 1991:79) The three translation strategies – supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, hijacking – that Luise von Flowtow identified from the translation practices of women translators of English Canada and Cuba are more widely used ever since. The translator claims her position as a co-author of the text rather than remain as the “modest, self-effacing translator”¹

“Papathara” and “Poothalayam”



Sara Joseph

This paper examines the English translations of two of Sarah Joseph’s short stories - “Papathara” and “Poothalayam” translated by J Devika “Paapathara” and “Dimwittude” in the light of feminist translation practices. Sarah Joseph writes in Malayalam, and her works are known for their striking feminist interventions both in thematic and language in the literary scenario. Her diction that marks a definite departure from the so called standard Malayalam is regarded for her

linguistic genius and often considered a major problem in translating her works. The style of her writing and the nuances of language use are challenging for the best translators.

Paapathara is a story set in a humble village atmosphere laden with superstitions and gendered prejudices. The story explores the problem of female infanticide in India, with the plot of a mother in labour pain praying and begging the midwife to save her to be born daughter. It is rich in the village female dialect, and feminine and cultural specific language and diction.

Poothalayam revolves around the thoughts of a woman scientist hailing from humble backgrounds in a Kerala village regarding preserving her chastity as she gets ready to go to work in the space. What upsets her, a scientist, is the thought of the possibility of having to compromise her chastity when out in the space as the only female among a group of men. The story ends as she decides to jump out of the spaceship and die if she is approached, for chastity is the greatest virtue she is taught to guard with her life from her childhood. The story employs dialect of migrated Christians from Kottayam to Malabar in a sarcastic tone.

Sara Joseph

Sara Joseph intervenes in the language and literary norms of the Malayalam literature and makes the woman heard. Her linguistic interventions make the female visible, creating a language of her own to make her voice heard. Joseph is doing an elaborate ritual of translation in the language she writes in as she composes her stories.

The translator's task here is double-fold. She not only has to transport the stories into English, an evolving global language that obviously is masculine-normative, from a third world language, but also has to bring in the tensions of a woman-oriented narration in a masculine language. This is like the story is conceived again by the translator, who shares the birth pangs of the work as does the author. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan in the afterword to *The Vigil*¹ says that translating Sarah Joseph is like returning to the author the child she has been entrusted with to look after. Feminist translations, however, has little to do with the metaphor of looking after a child. As translation is a rebirth, feminist translation is re-birthing, a task impossible to physically imagine, where the translator reproduces the text with authority and brands her name on the translation.

J Devika

J Devika in the translations employs different techniques of translations such as borrowing, calques, explicitation, etc. Footnoting is used freely in both translations. In translating "Paapathara," she preserves the title as such, with a foot note, so that the sense of sin and guilt, the load of female emotions and lack of it are preserved. In "Dimwittude," she does not preserve the Malayalam title. The various considerations in arriving at the title are discussed in the foot note. The footnotes elaborate various aspects of the titles and the translatorial choices she made. Her translation practice is active. She does not seem to erase out her existence in the text, instead draws attention to the act of translating.

The translator opts for a cultural translation of the stories. She chooses to keep a fair ground between localizing and foreignizing. The English J Devika uses in the stories are different and

deliberately distanced from the Standard English. The borrowing of words like “*appan*” (56) “*amma*,” (56) “*makanaakkum*” (72) adds to the foreign flavour in the translation. Calques like “Girl-bearing-bitch” (“*pennuperanankodichyey*”) are used in the text. Cases of explication as in “of robust build – a sturdy knee and a strong leg” (55) where a borrowed phrase along with in text explanation can also be seen.

Her strategy is one of intervention in the target language rather than in the text. Dialect was not translated into another possibly equivalent dialect in the translations. Instead, the translator experimented in the language to produce the effect of a different accent, with spelling that seeks to imitate the way Malayalees generally pronounce English with a Malayalam pronunciation. The typically chauvinist question *Randoonnu aanungadeoppa maakashathum mattum parannunadanntennathenkilumpattippoyaaithiyaanennacheyyum?*” is translated as “some-ding-uh haa-ppens after flying up with two-three men? What to do then, olly?” (57) This method is followed with respect to dialect in both translations. Devika’s translation engages in an active dialogue with the text that is a translation of its own right into the source language.

Relevance of Feminist Studies

The relevance of feminist studies is its capacity to evolve through self-reflection and self-criticism. Experimenting and exploration of new strategies and techniques are central to their resistance and reclaiming. The source texts and translations discussed here excel at this; the translator, asserting her role in giving the text a new life in translation, rather than being an ever apologetic, absentee entity. The feminist-turn in the discipline of Translation Studies and the feminist practices it brought to the discipline boosted the development of the practice and theory of translation. Feminist translations problematize cultures, histories and languages. The notion of meaning is interrogated ever more by the feminist translators, in a global scenario that is centred on the transfer of languages. The constant revisions and re-evaluations it demands on the paradigms our languages and literatures are found in, and this necessitates a promising shift towards the creation and adoption of better sensibilities and standards in them, and for language dictates how we construct and perceives our lives, to society in general.

NOTES

¹ “Women’s liberation must first be liberation from patriarchy” was the call for action and a widely used slogan during the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

¹ Barbara Goddard cited in Simon.

¹English translation of Sarah Joseph’s novel *Oorukaaval*

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