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Translatress, Translator, Translation.

I still manage to surprise a few scholars from other fields when they hear that there is such a thing as research of gender issues within the field of translation studies. It may seem as such a narrow niche – but only deceptively so. It is language, linguistics, pragmatics, culture, history, literature, anthropology, gender metaphors, communication, interpreting, cultural politics, social studies and politics, psychology and I can go on and on. History seems to be a very appropriate starting point for my presentation, so let me go back to 1654.

That is the year when Gilles Menage coined the infamous expression still used today – *les belles infideles*. How clever! Invoking beauty not just semantically, but also phonetically. But this double beauty masks the maliciousness of the expression. While referring to a specific mode of translation, it asserts that beauty and fidelity cannot coexist. Moreover, since the French gender is feminine, it clearly refers to women. To this day, fidelity in translation is a hotly debated issue. It struck me as rather odd when a professor at a conference where I presented a paper on translation and gender asked me whether I did not think that fidelity is a virtue and should be promoted rather than contested. This was one of those moments when I realized how pervasive the gendered language in translation studies had become. It is not the virtue of fidelity that feminist translation scholars want to contest. It is the mode of the discourse, the context in which ‘fidelity’ is used; it is the very specific and narrow meaning of ‘fidelity’ extracted by those (males) who use gendered rhetoric.

The use of *Les Belles Infideles* (both as gendered language and more specifically as a name for an approach to translation) exemplifies this point. After it was introduced, it became the dominant mode of translation in France for about two centuries. This mode favored assimilation, which resulted in translations dubbed improvements or reproductions. In other words, the translation was unfaithful. In this period, unfaithful, improved translations were preferred; they were considered **beautiful**. To elaborate

further on the meaning of this metaphor is easy. Beautiful women are often considered unfaithful. Or, more precisely, that was what men feared – if a woman were beautiful, then, in their logic, she would be unfaithful. Based on this fallacious thinking, it follows that translations that were unfaithful were also beautiful. As I mentioned already, since they are unfaithful and beautiful, they must be feminine both in their (French) grammatical gender and in general.

Let's look a bit more at beauty and fidelity in translation. Sherry Simon notes in *Gender in Translation* that the gendering of language and the conflicting feelings about beauty and fidelity can be traced as far as the 4th century when the official saint of translators, St. Jerome, was actively translating and writing treaties on translation. The saint that he was (is?), he believed that when the translator translates, he must do as the people of God were commanded to do with their captive women that were beautiful: the translator has to shave off their hair, pare off their nails. That is, he has to make a captive woman a wife, a faithful wife of course, which means her beauty must be effaced, excised. Later, in the 16th century, Thomas Drant, another translator, uses the same biblical passages (Deuteronomy) to explain translation and the role of the translator. By shaving off the hair and paring off the nails, the translator has “wiped away all [her] vanity and superfluity of matter.”

Note how important it is for the translator to be able to ‘handle’ or to ‘manipulate’ the translation. More than that, in academic discourse (past and present), translation process is likened to a marriage where fidelity is of utmost importance so that the offspring (i.e. the translation) is legitimate and worthy. The use of the metaphor of the original text as a female, or virgin, results in two approaches – either the virgin’s chastity and innocence must be protected (“with how much ease is a young Muse Betray’d ... Let no Austerity breed servile Fear, No wanton Sound offend her Virgin Ear” as the Earl of Roscommon suggests in his 17th century treatise on translation (Baker 1998: 94)). Or, in the process of translation, the original text - the virgin - must be penetrated, violated, even raped. In either case, the translator usurps the author’s role – the role of the father, the one who creates and produces or authors the offspring by handling the virgin (be it protecting her or raping her).

There is an obvious incongruity as to the issue of fidelity and beauty. Just about when the Earl of Roscommon was pondering the chastity of the virgin text and the need to protect it, Gilles Menage in France praised the beautiful and unfaithful text. Whether or not fidelity is deemed an asset, the rhetoric and the metaphors of the discourse always involve gendered language suggesting power relations in the translation process, violence and misogynic inclinations. This type of discourse has survived until the present. George Steiner's essays on translation are a good example. In *After Babel*, he openly declares that "eros and language mesh at every point. Intercourse and discourse, copula and copulation, are sub-classes of the dominant fact of communication." (Steiner 1975: 38). Of course, eros and language can mesh at every point, but gendered language should never be used to perpetuate power relations, be it women versus men, adults versus children, majority versus minority, etc. Steiner assumes the inferior status of women and further exacerbates the injury by using an offensive way of describing his position. He states that "the status of women has been akin to that of children. Both groups are maintained in a condition of *privileged* inferiority. Both suffer obvious modes of exploitation – sexual, legal, economic – while *benefiting* from a mythology of special regard" (ibid. 38, my emphasis). His patronizing attitude is further emphasized when he discusses the differences between the "I" of men and the "I" of women. He demonstrates his disappointment when he asserts that "the "I" of women intimates a more patient bearing, or *did* until Women's Liberation" (ibid. 41, my emphasis). Alas, women decided that the condition of privileged inferiority is not what they desired.

As for Steiner's approach to translation, he himself states that it is based on the model of Levi-Strauss's understanding of social structures "as attempts at dynamic equilibrium through an exchange of words, women, and material goods" (Baker 1998: 190). This approach is fourfold – without going into details of Steiner's theory, let me mention the second stage: *aggression*. This is when the translator goes towards the foreign and aggressively takes the meaning of the original text. Let us not forget the original text is theorized in feminine terms.

Steiner's approach is still being theorized today. He is unapologetic about the fact that his solution is embedded in violent language. In fact, he follows Hegel and Heidegger in stating that all cognition is aggressive; therefore, translation as a type of

cognition or interpretation must be aggressive. Interestingly, Steiner cautions that, even if aggression and invasion is necessary, it does not always result in satisfaction. The translator's failure brings sadness, "the Augustinian *tristitia* which follows on the cognate acts of erotic and intellectual possession" (Steiner 1975: 187). But even if the translator following the appropriative, aggressive acts of translation, is not satisfied, there is justification, which, again, is securely planted in power language – erotic and intellectual *possession*.

So far, it has been the original text that needed to be manipulated, excised. The issue becomes much more complicated when the translator is theorized. Unfortunately, the Western tradition of translation has been trapped in the logic and thinking based on the dichotomy of creating versus re-creating. Creating as in writing, authoring, fathering, i.e. a male, primary activity versus derivative, secondary, female activity of translating (understand non-creative activity). This, of course, reflects a struggle for power and authority omnipresent in the translation theory discourse. Serge Gavronsky's essay *From Piety to Cannibalism* serves as an extreme example of sexual and dichotomous rhetoric. The subject of his essay treats *the* topic in translation studies – should the translator be submissive or aggressive (note the similar vocabulary to that of Steiner). As it is clear from the title, there are, according to Gavronsky, two types of translators – those who are pious and those who are cannibalistic towards the original text. The pious translator is submissive to the original and is a mere conduit for the author's, creator's thoughts (the phallus pen). Again, the issue of fidelity is at the center. Gavronsky characterizes this dichotomous author-translator relationship in monastic terms of the vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and inferiority. However, there is pleasure waiting for the translator. Gavronsky, proceeding with his sexual narrative, asserts that the translator does, in fact, feels immense pleasure of sexual nature in the process of translating. This pleasure is officially recognized by the publisher once the translation is published.

Explaining his aggressive, cannibalistic type of the translator, Gavronsky does not spare the readers any gruesome details. The cannibalistic translator "seizes possession of the original [and] savors the text" (Gavronsky 1977: 60). This way, the cannibal (i.e. the translator) breaks through the defenses of the original. The cannibalistic translator thus manifests his sexual transgression, "desire of an indescribable pleasure" (ibid. 60). The

translator captured, raped the original and mutilated it beyond recognition. (Let me mention here, in passing, that the goal of any translation is understanding and communication.)

Let me put forth this thought – could it be the perceived inferiority of translation as a non-creative activity implies that it is carried out mostly by women? The basis for this question lies in the dichotomy men versus women, authors versus translators; men privileged to discourse and reason, to independent and original thinking versus women destined to copying men’s thoughts and acting as conduits of men’s discourse and reasoning. I read somewhere that Stendhal said to women: “do not write, but translate. That way, you will earn an honorable living”. In other words – be silent, please. Shoshana Felman in *What Does a Woman Want?* observes the very same condition when she says: “it is [...] striking that the dichotomy [...] Speech/Silence exactly coincides [...] with the dichotomy Men/Women” (Felman 1993: 32).

Feminist translation scholars such as Simon, von Flotow, Chamberlain, Spivak, Godard, and Bassnett identify and criticize this constant minimizing and devaluing of women’s contribution to social and literary sphere in our patriarchal society. In her book *Gender in Translation*, Sherry Simon defines the “agenda” of feminist translation, which “aims to identify and critique the tangle of concepts which relegates both women and translators to the bottom of the social and literary ladder (Simon 1996: 1). Translation as a process of interlinguistic and cultural transfer does not simply ‘mirror’ the original, but contributes to it. If we rethink the issue of evaluating translations (and translators) and their status within this framework, the endless comparison of translations with their original becomes pointless.

The issue of feminist agenda in translation is not as new as it may seem. Let’s go back to the 16th century for a moment. Back then, translation as the inferior type of activity was the only “penmanship” deemed appropriate for women. For these women, translation functioned as a camouflage for their involvement in literary production and a vessel for creativity, at least to some degree. Soon, women translators took full advantage of this ‘derivative’ work and used it to voice their opinions and, ultimately, to bring about social changes, via prefaces to their translations. As a great example Simon mentions translatress Margaret Tyler whose preface to Calahorras’ romances has been compared to

a feminist manifesto. Calahorra was a Spanish writer who wrote romances about women whose life choices did not conform to the norms of the times. In her preface, written in 1578, Margaret Tyler defends the right of women to translate works of this kind, not just biblical passages as was the norm. In so doing, she pushes the agenda of social openness and acceptance of women who refuse to conform to social norms.

Among today's feminist translator scholars, Von Flotow is an important figure. She recognizes, and I believe this is what is really important, that "feminist work in translation practice, theory and criticism undermines the temptation to formulate generally applicable theoretical models" (von Flotow 1997: 95). In other words, it simply does not make much sense to ponder theoretical models of translation (or anything, for that matter) without first looking at the status of translation and translators. The interesting thing to note here is the fact that even feminist scholars use gendered language – it is so pervasive that indeed, the notion of fidelity, for example, is not really being debunked; rather, it is contested and re-conceptualized. Simon, another prolific feminist scholar, exemplifies attitudes of feminist scholars dealing with the notion of fidelity. In men's writings it is presented as a notion in translation that is not to be questioned, as an operative term whether or not fidelity as an approach to translation is preferred. Women's writings, however, question and contest the notion of fidelity. It is discussed and debated at great length, but as a notion, it has not been rejected. It has become part of the vocabulary of our rhetoric and established as a concept. For example, Helen R. Lane, a very well known translator, does not actually dismantle fidelity, only discusses and questions it (Ronald Christ, *The Translator's Voice: An Interview with Helen R. Lane*). She offers her very lucid views of the difficulties for those who want to pursue translating and translation theory academically and of the inferior status of translators, their anonymity. According to Lane, the translator is a co-creator and both the author and the translator can only gain by cooperation, if possible. This view counters the prevalent notion of authorship as something highly individual, the notion of the author as the creator-genius. Even after she expresses her views on translation as cooperation, she does not dismiss fidelity. More than that, she uses another gendered expression to explain how the issue of fidelity is never brought up 'correctly', as there is no *monogamous relationship* between the original work and the translated work. Still, if she believes, as

she says she does, that the author and the translator are co-creators, co-writers, that they cooperate, then the cultural and semantic baggage of the notion of fidelity has no place here. Fidelity as it is generally understood is not congruent with the feminist view of translation and of translators. In fact, both the opposition of authorship/fathering and offspring/translation (where the offspring's legitimacy is secured through the notion of fidelity) and the construction of fatherhood and motherhood have been steadily undermined for years. Single mothers, surrogate mothers, gay parents, in-vitro fertilization have all rendered the notion of fidelity, especially as it relates to translation, irrelevant.

Let us now examine the language used by feminist translation scholars. Yes, gendered and sexualized language is often used by women scholars and translators. The obvious difference is that feminist scholars use it to express pleasure, not aggression. This is reflected in Carol Maier's essay *A Woman in Translation, Reflecting*. She reveals that she experiences textual pleasure when she translates. In a great contrast to men's rhetoric, Maier quotes Isadora Wing when she says that "in translation [...] there is no power game [...] No one is trying to prove anything or get anything out of anyone" (Maier 1985: 6). Maier follows this by describing pleasures of translating in rather sexual language. She believes translation offers "a way of learning to let go in a language, to know intimately a body of a particular text and [...] create a new body through the pleasure of shared experience" (ibid. 6). In fact, non-violent sexual language was used by women as far back as Renaissance England. Katherine Philips, a prolific translatress, uses a playful, courtly language when her patron asks her to do more translations:

... and the next time I saw him, [he] so earnestly importuned me to pursue that translation that to avoid the shame of seeing him who had so lately commanded a kingdom become a petitioner to me for such a trifle, I obeyed him so far as to finish the act in which that scene is ... (cited in von Flotow, 1997: 70)

Returning to the present, Susan Bassnett does not need to be 'courtly and playful'; indeed, she takes the use of sexual language to new heights when she argues for an "orgasmic theory of translation, the result of elements [that] are fused into a new whole in an encounter that is mutual, pleasurable and respectful" (ibid. 13). However sexual this language is and however criticized by some, it is aiming at pleasure and respect.

There is yet another approach to feminist translation as exemplified by Susan Jill Levine. She discusses her translation of Infante's *Tres Tristes Tigres* in an essay titled *Translation as (Sub)version* where the operative word is dissidence. She chooses Infante because he "digs into the root (route) of hypocrisy, into the very matter in which our consciousness is inscribed, that is, language. [...] [Infante] twists words inside out, revealing their hollow center" (in Venuti 1992: 79) This is partly what constitutes his subversion and dissidence and, in turn hers, by translating Infante's works. She translates the title as *Three Trapped Tigres* because it is a good metaphor of *Tres Tristes Tigres*, not because it is an accurate translation. Thus, she subverts the original semantics, and puts sounds before sense as a form of dissent. In translating Infante's subversive texts, she seeks pleasure: "alliterating words literally copulate with one another; the repetition of sounds produces a sensual effect" (ibid. 78). She is openly subverting the text semantically by 'helping' words copulate with one another, thus flaunting fidelity.

De Lotbiniere-Harwood, from Quebec, is another translator promoting assertiveness in feminist translations and writings. She is unapologetic about her interventionist translation praxis; in fact, she defines translation as a political practice. In her work, she feminizes generically written French texts in order to make "women visible and resident in language and society" (cited in von Flotow 1997: 28). For example, she translates *Quebécois*, the generic (masculine) adjective referring to the population of Quebec, as *Quebécois-e-s*. In other words, she uses French neologisms in her English translations. In this particular case, she uses the French grammar to make women visible in language by adding the feminine *e* suffix and pluralizing thus created adjective one more time. Moreover, she is very conscientious about avoiding "generic malespeak" and translates generic pronoun forms as *her and his, women and men*, etc. Feminist translators favoring interventionist practice openly acknowledge that, using Godard's words, "translation, in this theory of feminist discourse, is production, not reproduction" (ibid. 44). When criticized as manipulative of the original meaning rather than its translation, the assertive feminist translators are very open to admit that they do, indeed, have a social, cultural and political agenda – as mentioned already, it is to make women visible.

Whether or not criticized by some from the point of view of translation theory, feminist translation scholars look for ways to dismantle the status quo and to counter the pervasive androcentric language use. As long as the androcentric logic, language and rhetoric survive, the subjective feminist writing will continue in order to counter it. Of course, we all desire a genuine dialogue and constructive criticism – how else could we further any field of inquiry? This may sound a bit idealistic, but I will end my presentation with aspirations for a discourse of any differences – be they gender, cultural, social, linguistic or political - without the pervasive usage of the language of dichotomies, power relations and androcentric attitudes.

Even though the scope of this presentation does not allow me to go into detailed analyses or to present exhaustively all the manifold gender issues embodied within translation, I do hope I was able to illustrate their relevance, importance, depth and complexity in this field of mine called translation studies.

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