

# *The Contribution and Controversy of Feminist Translation*

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**Abstract:** The essay first summarizes the historical development of feminism and evaluates the relationship between feminism and translation. To illustrate the nature of feminist translation, it elaborates the general ideologies and specific strategies of feminist translation. The contributions and the controversies of feminist translation are also provided in order to help people better understand its impact on both feminist movements and the development of translation studies. Eventually, by evaluating the controversies and giving correspondent suggestions, the author also aims to help feminist translation's future development.

**Keywords:** feminist translation, gender equality, feminist linguistics

## **1. Introduction**

The definition of feminism itself is complicated. It varies in different historical periods through different feminist movements. Modern feminism has experienced three stages, usually called three waves, and each wave's central ideas and followed streams are slightly different. Their focus has shifted from eliminating legal/political inequality to the pursuit of significant changes of the social structure/culture, from perceiving the female group as a whole to concerning each individuals' race, class, and sexual orientation, from focusing on the similarity between men and women to supporting women-centered perspectives [1]. In short, the concept of feminism is dynamic and can be classified into different types based on its advocates' stands in different historical situations. However, the universal goal of all feminism is to establish gender equality in economic, political, social, and other fields. It aims to eliminate discrimination based on genders and fights for female rights in the patriarchal society.

Historically, translation has always been inextricably linked with women. On one hand, the association between women and translation can date back to the Middle Ages. When females could not share their opinions and comments in public, translation provides a way to access the literature and culture field [2]. On the other, females and translation are both in a secondary and neglected status and therefore linked together. In traditional translation studies, the process of translations is usually seen as mechanical exchanging information between different cultures and languages, and therefore, the productions are considered the derivations and appendages of the original texts. The status of translation and translators are both considered relatively low in both the literature field and society. The most evident example is 'Les belles infideles', a pun presented by France translation commentator Gilles Menage, which means 'beautiful but unfaithful women/translation' [3]. This famous metaphor associates translation's deviation from the original text with female betrayed from male and are supported by many translation commentators afterward. Under such male-dominated historical background, it is common for the public to link things defined as subordinate, derivative,

passive, and substandard with women, which is especially true when evaluating the relation between women and translation.

However, the situation has changed in the second-wave feminist movement in the 1980s when feminists started to focus on the cultural field. They started to realize that the gender difference is not natural but the result of culture and politics. 'Women are not born as women but asked to be women' [4]. In other words, the patriarchal ideology shapes women into the social roles that men want them to be, and language plays an essential role in promoting the authority of patriarchal ideology. Therefore, feminist writing and criticism have emerged. Increasing feminist writers start to use language as a weapon to fight against such cultural suppress.

Feminist writing aims to find a new language and literature form to reflect the female experience and emphasize the voice of women. Feminist criticism explores how literature and other cultural productions reinforce or undermine women's economic, political, social, and psychological oppression [5]. Under such cultural revolution, feminists have subverted the cognition of traditional translation, in which the translation can only be the derivation of the source text, into feminist translation, a new creative writing practice, in which feminist 'intervene' of the source text is encouraged, and traditional moral of faithfulness is no longer the focus. Translators are encouraged to make feminist changes to the parts considered as 'oppression on women.' Combining feminist writing and criticism, feminists use translation as a weapon to fight against the patriarchal ideology and promote women's voices in the hope of achieving a final goal of gender equality.

The following essay illustrates the nature and the contributions of feminist translation by elaborating its general ideologies, specific strategies, and impacts on different aspects; then, by examining its controversies, corresponding suggestions are also presented to aid its future developments.

## **2. The Nature of Feminist Translation**

The nature of feminist translation can be seen through its major ideologies and specific strategies. The translators before the emergence of feminist translation preferred Nida's traditional theory of faithfulness to the original text, which views translation purely as a secondary derivation of the source text. The translating process is focused on meaning equivalence. On the other hand, feminist translation views translation more as a creative writing practice that encourages translators to intervene [6]. This change has put translators in the same position with authors as cultural creators instead of automatic meaning exchange. During such a process, some powerful strategies are used. The major strategies are introduced and concluded by famous feminist translators Luis von Flotow – supplementing, hijacking, as well as prefacing and footnoting. By supplementing, a feminist translator can add more feminist connotations/meanings into the feminist source text to do supplement and achieve a better effect. Hijacking means 'hijack' those non-feminist texts and change those parts considered gender discrimination. Lastly, the preface and footnotes illustrate the feminist translator's purpose and strategies in the whole translating process, making it more understandable, and the female status is also emphasized [7]. In conclusion, by giving female translators freedom in expressing their creativity, these strategies reflect the nature of feminist translation, that is, promoting the dominance of females to fight against gender privilege and inequality.

## **3. The Contribution of Feminist Translation**

There is no doubt that feminist translation has made some contributions to the feminist movement. From the linguistic point of view, it reduces gender discrimination by eliminating the usage of 'male-centered language' and modifies the patriarchal plots/characters. The strategies, such as adding the translator's preface and footnote, also make the translator more visible. The translator's presence can

be seen and observed by readers. Similarly, female translators can also be noticed in this way. It improves females' status and contributes to promoting feminism ideology to the general public.

On the other hand, feminist translation provides a brand-new view in advancing translation development. Giving more freedom in the translation process supports the translator as a re-writer of the original text. The precise boundary between the writer and the translator is erased. The translation is no longer a simple copy of the source text but a kind of literary creation. The process of translating is no longer considered as simply pursuing mechanical meaning equivalence but the process of rewriting and recreation in the target linguistics and culture. This significant move of meaning recreation has given a more diversified view in evaluating translation studies' future development. Traditionally, translation studies pursue what we call equivalence, but translation is a process of presenting cultural, political, historical, and meaning differences [6]. This view emphasizes language and culture differences, making translation studies more flexible and open.

Feminist translation also gives new impetus to the development of translation by giving the public a glimpse of vivid examples of translation's social function promoting gender equality. Many people are reluctant to engage in translation work and research because of certain stereotypes, such as simple repeated work, relatively low social status, and mechanical workload. However, by viewing the role of translation as a creative transformation and giving to the positive social benefits it creates, the social reputation of translation is enhanced, which will help enlarge populations who are willing to engage in translation professions and research.

Feminist translation can also enhance our awareness of resisting cultural hegemony [6]. With the development of globalization, the integration of culture and the pursuit of unity can easily lead to cultural hegemony, which means the culture of a weak country is assimilated by the culture of a strong-influential country, leading to the loss of cultural diversity. In this sense, translation plays a crucial role in cultural exchange. Feminist translation emphasizes the philosophy of difference, primarily focuses on the weak when in binary opposition. Its call for creative gender adaptation of the original works also enlightens us to make the localized creative adaptation, preserving the culture of weak states.

#### **4. The Controversy of Feminist Translation**

After evaluating feminist translation's contributions, we can also see criticism and controversies against it. The first controversy for feminist translators is the criticism that the current feminist translation strategies can be radical, irrational, and against their stand, such as the debatable faithfulness. Traditionally, translations should be faithful to the original works, and translators should be faithful to the authors and the audience of the original works. The translators are expected to convey the exact meaning of the authors to the target audience and serve as a communicative bridge between authors and foreign readers. On the other hand, feminist translation gives much more freedom to translators' creativity in the translating process. They are not expected to be just meaning-copy parrots. Feminist translation emphasizes the feminist change of the original texts and encourages creative feminist adaptations. The over-emphasizing of the 'womanhandle' and 'intervene of the source texts' are usually criticized as a radical act in violating the faithful principle. Specific changes are viewed as irrational for overcorrecting gender discrimination and sometimes intruding on authors' interests. At the same time, there is also a specific criticism against Flotow's feminist translation strategy, Hijack. The core of feminist translation is also about criticizing males' unequal treatment of females violently and aggressively [6]. However, the inventory of hijack, that is, 'hijack' those non-feminist texts despite their original intention, is also aggressive and unequally treats the original texts. Translators consider this double standard as irony and against the nature of feminism.

Feminist translation also faces some internal contradictions and disagreements. Although the common goal for feminism is to achieve gender equality, the definition of feminism is complicated.

Sometimes, the figure in western feminist translation cannot represent females from third-world countries [1]. There are certainly some groups that support the whole female group to achieve a better result in feminist movements, while others have believed that the unity between race and class is much stronger than gender. Any emphasis on the commonality does damage to the diversity. The advocacy that feminists should focus on common experience is considered privileged and westernism [1].

There is also a conflict between feminist adaptation and historical authenticity. Sometimes the modification is not suitable with the historical background of the particular era and therefore results in loss of authenticity. In other words, some feminist translators tend to make particular feminist modifications, such as expanding the autonomy of female characters or changing how female characters speak, to fight against men-centered plots. This modification can be in contradiction with that particular historical period. In other words, If the reality of gender inequality existed at that time, such a change would not only violate the historical reality, but also would not be very desirable from an anti-discrimination point of view. Sometimes it is the true presentation of the reality that invites reflection and criticism.

## 5. The Suggestions for future development of Feminist Translation

Corresponding suggestions are provided in this section. To solve the faithfulness problem, we need to consider two aspects of faithfulness. The first aspect is being faithful to the author, and here comes the problem of whether the translator has the author's permission. The translators' freedom cannot be argued over the authors' right to intellectual property, so if the feminist translator wants to make feminist adaptations, she or he must adequately inform the author and get the permission. With the author's permission, the translation work can be considered 'faithful' to the author.

The second aspect of the faithfulness problem is the argument of being faithful to the audience. The problem is established on the premise that all the audience wants to read the exact meaning of the original work. If that is the case, unfortunately, it can never be achieved. Language is the representation of culture, and something cannot be translated for the uniqueness of different cultures. Even though different readers come from the same cultural background as the author, they can also have different understandings of the same passages. Meanings change from the moment they are created [6], so it is natural for people to make changes and present them in another way, not to mention that the premise of all the audience wanting to know the exact meaning of the source text is a subjective and prejudiced assumption. The audience has the freedom of choosing different translation versions. With proper preface and introduction, they can consciously choose whether they want to read a feminist translation or not.

The second suggestion is for radicalness. Someone has argued that the Hijack strategy is radical and irrational, which may violate the nature of equality that the feminist translators pursue. Here is the explanation. These feminist translators are not pursuing gender equality, but the emancipation of women, and such emancipation, or we call revolution, often needs to take more drastic measures. However, I doubt the effectiveness of such an aggressive approach. This kind of behavior tends to easily arouse the antipathy of the academia and the general public, which is not conducive to the development of the feminist movement. Hence, more gentle measures should be considered, which means that radical changes should be discussed with the author.

Feminist translation also faces the internal disagreement that third-world females think western feminists are over-representing them. Here comes the debatable argument that does gender unite people more than race or class? Some scholars argue that such solidarity is better for promoting equality for the female group as a whole. In contrast, others argue that race and class are more important and that any emphasis on the commonality is unfair to the diversity, especially for disadvantaged groups, and the latter criticizes the former's view as privileged [1]. The root for such

disagreement is because different people in different social settings have different interests and therefore generate different cognitive of the problem, and if we only see problems in such a binary view, the consensus can never be met. The critical point for us to explore is in what situation, when, and where should gender unite people more than race and class? The answer is which conflict appears to be more acute, then which identity should be more prominent. Such questions should be discussed according to different times and regions. For example, in some countries and regions, if the gender conflict is more acute, the unity of women is more conducive to achieving united political goals. At the same time, if the class or racial oppression is more intense in another area, it should be the priority to be solved. For example, in the early years of the new democratic revolution of China, under the political and economic conditions at that time, ethnic contradictions were higher than those between the sexes, and giving priority to solving ethnic contradictions was higher than solving the problem of the status of female. Therefore, there is no feminist revolution in China. It was carried out under the new democratic revolution of anti-feudalism and anti-aggression [2].

On this issue, it is also unnecessary to make a clear definition between race/class and gender. Different oppressions can be solved in one movement. Political movements can have various targets as long as the common goal is consistent, then both sides can exist. It is unnecessary to divide the forces into two binary camps. For example, China's national revolution, which aimed to solve class oppression, also promoted Chinese women's liberation, and at the same time the development of Western feminism also had a considerable impact on the awakening of Chinese feminist movements.

The last suggestion is for the conflict with historical authenticity. The determining point of such issues is to consider the function of translation and the choice of the source text, in other words, whether the text is suitable for feminist translation. If the source text is a realistic historical record, then the feminist translation distorts the facts, which is not entirely appropriate. However, if it is fiction or a creative writing piece, then it surely can be translated in a feminist way, especially for some children-oriented creative books. They are suitable for advertising equality values of feminism. Different functions and roles of translation also decide the strategies employed in texts. When translating texts, translators may also take the functions and group of audiences into consideration.

## 6. Conclusion

For a long time, females and translation have been associated together for being considered both as a derivative of their counterparts. However, during the second wave of the feminist revolution, feminists gradually realized that social culture is a decisive role in the equal rights movement rather than politics and law. They began to use language to fight against the patriarchal ideologies. As an important platform in cultural exchange, translation has become an important tool for feminists to fight against sexism. Feminist translation strategies emancipate the freedom and creativity of translation, which not only opens a new perspective for the development of translation studies, but also highlights the dominance of female, promoting the development of the feminist movement. Nevertheless, with the promotion of feminist translation, various controversies have followed. Facing such contradictions as the traditional faithfulness, the radical accusation, the internal splits based on race/class, and the conflicts with historical authenticity, this paper has provided corresponding suggestions.

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