

## THE CHANGING PROFESSION

## Feminist Translation and Translation Studies: In Flux toward the Transnational

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## Early Development and Successes

The 1980s in Anglo-America and Europe might well be termed the “era of feminism”: feminist literary theory, literary production, studies, and research were in full development with authors such as Hélène Cixous, Adrienne Rich, Margaret Atwood, Ursula Le Guin, Marina Yaguello, Michèle Causse, Monique Wittig, Nicole Brossard, and many more. Feminism was asserting itself in many university disciplines. In that same decade translation studies was also becoming a more focused academic discipline, at least in certain parts of Europe, Canada, and Israel (Bassnett and Lefevere; Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies, In Search, and Translation*; Simon, “Délivrer la Bible”). Out of this parallel development came “feminist translation” and later “feminist translation studies”—in both of which Canadian writers, translators, and academics, such as Barbara Godard, Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, and Sherry Simon, played important roles. A discourse that began to flourish around translation at this time, theorizing translation as production and not reproduction, as a deliberate rewriting that reflects cultural, literary, linguistic, and ideological differences manifested in texts, also helped bring into existence the feminist translator, who “affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text” (Godard, “Feminist Poetics” 51). The idea that a text could and perhaps should be *womanhandled* meant replacing the conventional “modest self-effacing translator” with “an active participant in the creation of meaning” (51). This change in long-dominant ideas about the translator’s mechanically reproducing text, striving

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for equivalence and transparency yet never achieving them, and operating as an invisible hand that simply turns words of one language into another went well with other feminist critiques of conventional views on translation, notably the traditional gendering of translation as a lesser, weaker, “reproductive” feminine activity (Chamberlain). The feminist stance countered this with the proud and loud assertion that henceforth “the feminist translator [would] flaunt her signature in italics, in footnotes—even in prefaces” (Godard, “Feminist Poetics” 51).

These ideas developed quickly into translation strategies, into broader theorizing about subjective and political-ideological aspects of translation and translation history (Godard, “Theorizing”; Lotbinière-Harwood; Simon, *Gender*; Flotow, *Translation*), and into copious translation projects of women’s writing, in English and several European languages. Research appeared on women’s roles as translators in history and their effects, on the translation of women writers, on the treatment through translation of so-called key texts—the Bible (Stanton; Korsak), early feminist works by Mary Wollstonecraft (Gibbels, *Mary Wollstonecraft* and “Wollstonecraft Meme”) and Simone de Beauvoir (Simons; Flotow, “Translation Effects”)—and on the fate of fictional gendered characters in translation (see Leone on Borges’s Spanish “version” of *A Room of One’s Own*). The success and influence of feminist approaches in both translation and translation studies were further solidified when the topic was included in handbooks and encyclopedias of translation studies that began to appear in the late 1990s (see the selection below after the works-cited list). Dissenting and cautioning voices arose occasionally (Spivak; Arrojo), largely in regard to postcolonial concerns about the appropriation of women writers’ texts from around the world through translation for individualistic political or careerist purposes. It became clear that that particular “era of feminism” needed to broaden its purview, reach out to other cultures in less colonialist ways, and focus on wider swaths of translation activity, in political and cultural contexts well beyond the Anglo-American Eurozone, in order to develop a wider understanding of transnational communications, exchange, and feminist

interactions and interventions. The compilation *Translocalities/Translocalidades: Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/a Americas* (2014), edited by Sonia E. Alvarez and others, was one of the first complete books to address such questions, notably in regard to “the contemporary scenario of fragmented identities, contact zones, and border epistemologies” (Lima Costa 24)—that is, the many different (Latin/a American) participants in “transnational feminisms.” Its predominant use of “translation” as a metaphor for cultural transfer and change, however, moved the work farther into cultural studies than into transnational translation studies.

### Disturbances, and Transnational Onsets

While issues around postcolonialism have been important for the more diversified shift away from an Anglo-American European focus in feminist translation studies, other gender identity politics also came to disturb the successes of that particular “era of feminism,” notably the rise in Anglo-American academia of pluralized and fluid genders, queer theory, and LGBTQI\*\*\* and trans interests. These identity politics affected feminist work in various ways, often causing it to be seen as old-fashioned, essentialist, stuck in outdated binaries, or just plain retrograde (Olson; Strimpel), and titles of publications began to elide any reference to feminism, as well as overt references to women (Simon, *Gender*; Karpinski). There was, in fact, a decided lull in publications.

But theories travel, changing and adapting as they do so, and feminist work in and on translation was soon flourishing in other parts of the world—in India, the Middle East, East Central Europe, Russia, and Brazil, where the focus has largely been on how translatable Anglo-American and European feminist materials are and how useful those materials can be in new, translated forms. The challenges and difficulties—both political and practical—caused by the influx of foreign feminist works have led to further anti-colonialist criticism, as well as to activist work to promote indigenous and local forms of feminism. In 1998, for example, Tejaswini Niranjana raised questions in India about the postcolonial

“language of universalist humanism” inherent in Anglo-American and European feminisms—conveyed in English and by means of Anglo-American scholarship and influence—and about the conceptual frameworks articulated in this discourse (142). She posits two translation problems facing feminist work in India: on the one hand, the multilingual aspects of the country, where the official languages of Hindi and English are not available to every woman, which makes translation absolutely necessary, and on the other, the gap between less educated citizens and the English-speaking, English-educated Indian “elites” who reduce “the most visible and political articulations of [women’s] rights questions” to “a distinction between urban/rural and modernity/tradition, with the second term of the binary as the repository of backwardness” (143). Niranjana thus identifies several challenges facing feminist translation work beyond the Anglo-American Eurozone: first, the absolute need for translation in multilingual cultures and countries; second, a perceived disregard, even disdain, for local knowledges, customs, and languages as these are pushed aside by powerful imported foreign work; and third, the perceived colonialization of the local as it “learns” from the international (English and European) materials. One response to these challenges can be found in the collection published in 2015 entitled *Provocations: A Transnational Reader in the History of Feminist Thought* (Bordo et al.), where materials from various cultures and eras that can be read as feminist or woman-centered are presented and discussed in order to note the worldwide prevalence of centuries of thought that can be “translated” as feminist even though in its own culture it may not be so recognized or labeled. Like *Translocalities/Translocalidades*, *Provocations* seeks to broaden feminist history and theory and understand the phenomenon in its other cultural forms. But this is still unsettled and ongoing work.

### Toward Transnational Feminist Translation Studies

Since the late 1990s feminist scholars and activists have worked toward the transnational, seeking to incorporate, address, and understand other cultures and

constituencies, often in response to and criticism of international development “gender-mainstreaming” language and policies that tend to universalize “gender,” reserving the term largely for “women” yet rendering local women and their lives secondary if not invisible in the process (Parpart). Such scholars, however, have not worked in the world of translation studies, at most referring to the need to “translate global gender norms” or include “norm translators” in the development projects. Nonetheless, a focus on actual translation—the interlingual, sometimes word-for-word rendering of another culture’s texts, their representation and dissemination—has been developing in a post-Anglo-American and European feminist world, and the “transnational” approach is generally assigned a certain democratizing power: “Transnational feminist translation emphasises the ethical role translation has in facilitating cross-border and cross-linguistic alliances between women, which challenge prevailing hegemonies and regimes of oppression operating in neoliberal societies” (Castro and Spoturno 235). Further, transnational initiatives are described as undermining the influence of international or global (that is, “Western”) feminist applications and “combining the struggle against patriarchal structures and systemic inequalities with the struggle against power dynamics among and within women” (235). Finally, “feminist transnational approaches foreground an intersectional perspective that considers how race, gender, sex, class and other layers of oppression interact” (236). Transnational work thus seems to rest on three major ideas: resistance to the power of neoliberal economies, rejection of the global applications of feminisms devised in these economies, and the empowerment of women from all groups and categories worldwide regardless of differences and oppressions. The application of these principles is not without its challenges (Flotow, “On the Challenges”)—the hegemony of English remaining a major factor.

Indeed, much of feminist translation studies is concerned with the translatability of contemporary feminist work—either from or into English. For instance, Arab scholars working in American universities have pursued such questions (Amireh; Kahf; Mehrez) or have written on the work of

translating English-language feminist texts into Arabic (Kamal, “Translating” and “Travelling”). A certain anti-“Western” ethnocentrism, often based on local religious-political interests, has also been observed and discussed as hampering scholarly work in the field (Laghzali; Qanbar), while some Arab scholars have turned toward Islamic feminism as an appropriate path for Arabic feminist translation studies (Embabi).

In East Central Europe and Russia, feminist translation studies has examined the effects of the considerable funding that became available for the importation of feminist writings immediately upon the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Soviet power. Tatiana Barchunova notes the “uneasy transfer” (276) of feminist ideas and gender theory by “naïve translators” for whom English feminist terms such as “agency” or “empowerment” had no meaning and certainly no equivalents in Russian (287), and Kornelia Slavova points out that unlike the feminist movements in North America and Western Europe, which came into being “through years of grass-roots women’s organized activism, the feminist projects in the post-communist world emerged as a process of translating Western liberal ideas,” in other words through the importation of foreign matter (266). She also describes the chaotic and chronologically disordered process of translating “Western” feminist materials into Slavic languages as putting a further strain on their reception (268). Slavova posits and describes a resistance and reaction to the subsequent “top-down strategy of infusing gender equality through legislation, funding and university programmes” (266) that is not unlike the colonialist situation addressed by Niranjana in India twenty years earlier.

In South America, recent research initiatives in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile have drawn attention to the many different issues that feminist approaches to translation and translation studies could address: for example, the role of the indigenous nanny in much South American literature, which requires more than just translating the words of the text (Basaure et al.), the effect of power differentials between different varieties of Spanish when Chicana literature is translated into Spanish (Spoturno), and the

enormous effects of gender, race, and social class, as well as of histories of emigration, political upheaval, and indigeneity. While such research questions are rather recent in South America, two special issues of the translation studies journal *Mutatis Mutandis* (vol. 13, nos. 1 and 2) have focused strong introductory position papers and articles not only on the transnational aspects of feminist translation studies but also on the importance and value of publishing in the local languages of Spanish and Portuguese (see also Vanessa Lopes Lourenço Hanes’s essay in this issue of *PMLA*).

One striking example of successful transnational approaches in feminist translation work comes from Sri Lanka, where the researcher Kanchuka Dharmasiri was seeking ways to have her Sinhala-medium students read “Western” feminist authors in an increasingly ethnocentric environment that sneers at such foreign materials. She resorted to *Therīgāthā*, a compendium of two-thousand-year-old texts comprising accounts by Buddhist nuns about their female condition, and was able to demonstrate the remarkable parallels between their thinking and that of Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century and Beauvoir in the twentieth. She writes in her conclusion,

We see how translation operates in multiple directions. While the [“Western”] feminist texts offer a rereading of *Therīgāthā*, *Therīgāthā* offers a rereading of the feminist texts. It challenges the reader to interpret the notions of body, gender, and freedom in different contexts, perhaps bringing the reader’s own contexts to the discussion. (190)

This process of rereading texts that have become static, fixed, congealed over time is a vital aspect of feminist translation and translation studies, as Barbara Godard wrote in 1988 (“Feminist Poetics”). It is the “delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing” that will motivate reluctant students “to engage with texts rather than dismiss them brusquely” (Dharmasiri 190). Such studies are invaluable, but they remain somewhat rare.

An important question for many cultures and languages swirls around the word “gender”: What does it mean? How can it be translated? Should it actually be translated or simply transliterated, thus leaving it foreign? Joan W. Scott and I have addressed this question, pointing to the many different uses and meanings of the term in English, where the uncertainty and diversity of usage alone can make it untranslatable. We write that

there is no single original concept of gender to which subsequent translations can refer. Instead, there has been an ongoing conversation across linguistic and cultural boundaries in which the term is addressed, disputed, qualified, and adapted; in the process the ambiguities that the term itself has acquired, the tensions it contains, are revealed.

(Flotow and Scott 356–57)

And while enterprising feminist translators and editors such as Hala Kamal (in Egypt) are not averse to coining a new term, *al-jender*, and defending it (“Translating”), the overall tendency seems to be to leave it untranslated and therefore forever foreign—a late-twentieth-century Anglo-American coinage that may not have much to do with worldwide feminist theorizing or translating.

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