

Event 1: What makes a translation feminist?

Saturday 5 October 2024

Event report

The first event of the Feminist Translation Network took place at The Exchange in Birmingham, and online, as part of the Birmingham Literature Festival 2024. We held a morning and an afternoon session, both of which were well attended by Network members and members of the public. Our aim was to start exploring the Network's questions, in particular:

- What is feminist translation? Does it mean translations by women? Or translations of women? Is it the same thing as gender-inclusive translation?
- Is feminist translation a matter of identity or a matter of practice? If it is a matter of practice, is it the process of translation or the resulting text which can be described as feminist?

Morning session

In the morning, we had planned to hold a translation slam with Marilyn Booth and Nariman Youssef but Youssef had to cancel her attendance at short notice and so the slam was replaced by a translation reading with Booth. Booth chose to read from two of her recent translations of Arabic novels: *Silken Gazelles* by Jokha Alharthi (*Harir al-ghazala*, Beirut, 2021), published New York: Catapult, 2024; London: Scribner, 2024; Canada: Anansi International, 2024, and *Honey Hunger* by Zahran Alqasbi (*Jaw' al-'asal*, Ottawa, 2017), Cairo: Hoopoe, forthcoming 2025. She treated the audience to an extract from each, with the passage being read first from the Arabic source text by Birmingham PhD student Abdulhady Alroiei. Booth discussed her translation practice with session chair Catherine Boyle and took a number of questions from the audience.

The discussion touched briefly on feminist translation, for example the question of whether translating texts by women is a feminist act and what else might constitute 'feminist' translation. Booth suggested that it is important to translate writers of different genders and to be sensitive to constructions of gender identities in literature. Feminist translation might also be understood as translation activism, e.g. trying to improve the conditions in which translators work. These points were picked up again in our afternoon session.

Afternoon session

Our roundtable session in the afternoon was billed as a 'Feminist Translation Exchange' and attracted a sizable and highly engaged audience, leading to a lively discussion about various aspects of feminist translation as well as about translation more generally. Again, we had late changes to the panel with three participants unable to attend (publisher Bibiana Mas, translator Nariman Youssef, and academic Alison Phipps) and Catherine Boyle agreeing to step in at short notice. In the end, we were pleased to welcome four guests: Marilyn Booth, translator of Arabic fiction, including many novels by women; Catherine Boyle, translator and academic whose roles include directing the 'Out of the Wings' theatre translation and performance project; Thomas Glave, writer, academic, and trustee of our Project Partner

organisation Writing West Midlands; and Laura Woolley-Núñez, a PhD student at the University of Warwick who is doing practice-based research into feminist translation. Alison Phipps, who is Professor of Sociology at the University of Newcastle and an expert on feminism and sexual violence, kindly sent us her notes.

The session, chaired by Hilary Brown, was split into two halves, with the first hour being devoted to a discussion among the panellists and the second hour to audience Q&A. The discussion was wide ranging and panellists offered some interesting perspectives on the questions the Network will be exploring.

What is feminist translation? A key question for the panel was about the meaning of 'feminism' and whether we would need to settle on a definition of feminism in order to define feminist translation. There was some agreement that feminism is about women but Boyle pointed out that the notion of woman has changed and acknowledged that this is a complex issue, while Glave expressed scepticism that feminism can be translated across cultures given different understandings of feminism in different contexts.

Glave's point was developed in the notes sent by Phipps: "The discussion around translation as colonisation especially pertains to gender I think, since that binary has its genesis in Western ontologies and social practices and was (often violently) imposed on Indigenous communities during the colonial period (and is still being violently imposed on many communities, including trans and queer people, now). There's a big risk of echoing that in forcing our own understandings on other worlds through the practice of translation. There are also so many things that can be lost. In Judith Butler's latest book, they talk about how some Indigenous articulations of what we might call gender lose their temporal, spiritual, and social coordinates and meanings when they're forced into a Western conceptual 'box'."

A couple of the panellists suggested that feminist translation means translating works by women. Woolley-Núñez gave more details about her PhD project, in which she is translating a memoir by Maria Teresa León (1903-1983), an anti-Francoist Spanish woman writer who was better known as the wife of [the Spanish poet] Rafael Alberti than for her own writing or her (political) resistance. For Woolley-Núñez, feminist translation is a powerful tool to recover the voices of women who are not well known. Booth agreed to some extent, explaining that when she started translating there were almost no translations of Arabic women's writing in English and that she also viewed the recovery of women writers as a feminist act. However, Booth translates men as well as women writers and is interested in authors who question and investigate the construction of gender in their work, with gender understood as encompassing feminine, masculine, and non-binary identities. A member of the audience asked about the role of feminist translation in relation to Palestinian women and Booth agreed that feminist translation should have a role in this conflict. She noted that some publishers have paid attention to Palestine literature by women, resulting in an increased number of literary texts by Palestine women translated into English. She also noted, however, that there has been push-back as in the case of Adania Shibli [who was due to receive the 2023 LiBeraturpreis for her novel *Minor Detail*, translated by Elisabeth Jaquette], whose award ceremony was cancelled by the Frankfurt Book Fair.

Is feminist translation a matter of identity or a matter of practice? The translators on the panel seemed to agree that feminist translation is a matter of identity: their sense of themselves as feminists is important for their translation practice. Boyle spoke about how feminist translation means being aware of your subjectivity and positionality. Booth concurred that it was something that drove, for example, her choice of text and her response to the texts, although not something that may be visible in the texts themselves. In her notes, Phipps also emphasised the importance of being alert to the context and power relations of the act or process of translation, as well as one's own positionality within it.

There was some discussion about feminist processes of translation, in particular collaboration. We heard about the 'Feminist Translation in Practice' symposium (School of Advanced Study, University of London, May 2024), organised by Sophie Stevens, a Network member who was in the audience, which focused on collaborative practices in theatre translation and the significance of adopting a feminist position even if the work produced is not specifically feminist. Along the same lines, an audience member raised the issue of feminist translation in the context of the translation industry. The majority of translators in the UK and US are women (Booth confirmed that the same is true for Arab countries and Glave said that he was aware of only one male translator of Caribbean literature) and it has generally been a precarious, low-status and badly paid job. The implication of the question was perhaps that translators identifying as feminists might channel their feminism chiefly towards improving translators' working conditions.

The discussion touched a couple of times on how much licence the translator has to leave their mark on the translation. Glave admitted initially being perplexed by the idea of feminist translation as someone who is a writer and teaches creative writing and Caribbean literature. He reminded us that translation can be perceived as an act of colonisation or violence. Earlier in the discussion, he had quoted from a piece by Maryse Condé: "what is the task of the translator? It consists of using words in another idiom, in other words, his, i.e. words different from those chosen by the author after a long selection process. The translator turns the musicality of the text upside down and in the end destroys the lovingly elaborated score. In the course of this annihilation, the author's voice disappears and he is excluded from the text he so patiently produced. What voice then prevails and replaces the author's? It can only be that of the translator!" (Maryse Condé, *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*, translated by Richard Philcox (Seagull Books, 2014)). However, the translators on the panel argued that translators or the act of translation should be visible and it is the translator's role to bring the reader/theatre-goer towards the author and help them experience the foreignness of the author's work. Booth commented that it is sometimes difficult to decide how much intervention is justifiable. In the case of re-translations of the classics, where it can be argued the works have previously been translated from a chauvinistic perspective, it is easier to justify a new translation from a different angle [such as the 'feminist' translations by Emily Wilson of *The Odyssey* and Maria Dahvana Headley of *Beowulf*]. But Booth said she believes it is important to translate misogyny when it is there; the translator has a responsibility towards the reader to do so.

In terms of practice, there was some discussion of specific strategies which could be labelled feminist. For Woolley-Núñez, the choice of text is a feminist strategy. Additionally, including translator paratexts can be considered a feminist strategy. Woolley-Núñez and Booth also

reflected on feminist options for translating the generic masculine. Woolley-Núñez spoke about updating León's text by using gender-neutral nouns (e.g. translating the gender-marked 'niños', which is supposedly a generic masculine, with the gender-neutral 'children') while Booth thought such decisions depended on the nature of the text being translated. She mentioned her current translation of an Egyptian novel by a contemporary writer which is set in the 1960s and uses the generic masculine: it would be anachronistic to write 'he/she'. It is sometimes possible to use 'they', she said, but it depends on the text.

Finally, Phipps suggested in her notes that feminist translation practice is similar to feminist methodology in that it must be developed and constantly refined. She warns against implying that feminist translation is always a force for good, as is common among translation theorists: "being a woman, or even claiming a feminist identity, isn't a strong enough basis for the claim to be doing 'feminist work'. There are a lot of bad feminisms out there... feminism is definitely not always a force for good – and I imagine that as Global North feminists, even if we're trying to do careful and faithful translation work, we can find ourselves embroiled in colonial dynamics quite easily."