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Mediating Meaning: Feminist and Political Ethics of Translation in the Global South

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Abstract

Translation is often perceived as a linguistic task—converting words from one language into another. Yet, this seemingly neutral process is profoundly political. Translation involves choices that reflect ideologies, cultural priorities, and power dynamics. This paper explores translation and interpretation as political practices, drawing from postcolonial theory, conflict studies, institutional translation, and real-world scenarios. It argues that translation is a form of mediation that shapes political discourse, national identity, and access to justice. Through a qualitative discourse analysis of textual and institutional translation practices, the paper seeks to humanize translation, emphasizing the ethical responsibilities of translators and interpreters in today's interconnected, multilingual world.

Keywords: Translation, Global South, Feminist Translation, Gendered Care Ethics, Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

Translation is not simply about finding the right words—it is about interpreting meaning, tone, and cultural context. The act of translating is never neutral. It is embedded within power relations, both historical and contemporary. For example, when colonial administrators translated local laws and customs into English, they were not merely recording—they were reshaping local knowledge systems to suit imperial governance (Bhabha, 1994).

As Spivak (1993) reminds us, the translator's position is not outside power; it is deeply implicated in it. Translation often involves an asymmetry: some languages and narratives are seen as more worthy of translation than others. This hierarchy is particularly visible in postcolonial contexts, where colonial languages dominate intellectual, legal, and bureaucratic spaces even after independence. This paper argues that translation is not only a tool of communication but also a political act—one that requires ethical reflection, especially in multilingual societies. “Instead of being seen as reproductions of an exact meaning, translations are seen as texts in their own right which are always in the process of modifying, deferring and displacing the original. The translation process itself can be conceived of as an action in which the movement along the surface of language is made visible, and the limits of language and intertextuality explored. Thus, the term “difference” in translation, traditionally a negative term signifying distortion or deviation, is seen in a new light under the influence of deconstruction (as *différance*, meaning both difference and deferral), and many translation researchers believe that the notion of translation itself should also be reassessed.” (Wallmach, 2026, pp.1) “Since it takes the implications of the Saussurian theorisation of the arbitrary, conventional sign to its last consequences, thereby questioning the possibility of stable meanings that could be reproduced and recovered in their sameness, deconstruction implicitly and explicitly challenges all the traditional notions usually associated with translation as an idealised form of meaning transferral from one language to another, and from one culture to another, without the interference of either the translator or his or her circumstances. If meaning cannot be fully repeated even within the domain of that which we still call the “same” language, that is, if it is difference which is the basic trait of any process of signification, the traditional notion of the text as the immobile, protective container of its author’s intentional, supposedly recoverable meaning is radically revised.” (Wallmach, 2006, pp. 6)

2. Research Methodology and Research Gap

While considerable scholarship has examined translation as a cultural and literary act, fewer studies engage with translation as a politically situated practice with consequences for justice, state functioning, and gendered power. Existing studies often neglect the lived experiences of translators and interpreters in conflict zones and institutional spaces. This paper fills that gap by examining translation through the lens of discourse analysis and feminist critique.

The methodology employed is qualitative and interpretive, focusing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) of translated texts, legal documents, and testimonies. By examining the language used in translations across bureaucratic, humanitarian, and literary domains, the paper explores how discourses are framed, silenced, or altered. The paper explores various theoretical discourses of translation.

3. Literature Review

Translation in the postcolonial context is never neutral. Spivak (1993) famously argued that translation, particularly of feminist texts, must be approached with ethical responsibility, recognizing the asymmetry between the translator and the translated subject. Similarly, Homi Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes translation as a 'Third Space' where cultural meanings are negotiated, contested, and hybridized. In this space, meaning is not merely transferred but transformed. Translation thus becomes an act of cultural production and political intervention.

The Derridean idea of *différance* suggests that meaning is always deferred and contingent, further destabilizing the notion of fidelity or equivalence in translation. Instead of seeking equivalence, translation becomes an act of iteration, of rewriting, and of reinscribing the original in a new context. In doing so, it reveals the slippages and contradictions inherent in all acts of meaning-making.

Wallmach (2006) points out that translation is often guided by covert ideologies that determine what is translatable and what is left out. Translation, especially in legal, institutional, or humanitarian contexts, becomes an act of gatekeeping. The invisibility of the translator in such contexts masks the profound ethical and political implications of their choices. As such, translation is deeply embedded in the structures of power that shape knowledge, access, and justice.

Postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak have challenged the notion of translation as a transparent act of linguistic equivalence. Spivak (1993) emphasizes the 'politics of translation,' arguing that the process often serves hegemonic interests by erasing the cultural specificity of the source text. Bhabha (1994) introduces the idea of a "Third Space" in translation—a space of negotiation where meanings shift and hybrid identities are formed.

Translation is also linked to epistemic violence. When indigenous or subaltern voices are translated into dominant discourses, they are often framed in ways that make them intelligible to the dominant group but distort their original significance. For instance, Dalit literature in India, when translated into English, sometimes loses the visceral intensity and cultural embeddedness of its original language (Valmiki, 2003).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Translation in Conflict Zones: Interpretation as Survival

In conflict zones such as Kashmir or Palestine, translation is used to mediate testimonies of violence, official narratives, and resistance literature. Here, the translator is not an invisible conduit but an active agent who filters and frames meaning. For example, translations of testimonies of torture or human rights violations by international NGOs often follow institutional templates that erase the emotional and cultural specificity of the original account. The translator is caught between institutional expectations of objectivity and the ethical imperative of fidelity to the speaker's pain and voice.

In the legal context in India, the use of English as the primary legal language poses significant challenges for access to justice. Court judgments, police reports, and legal forms are often written in English, alienating large sections of the population. The translation of these documents into regional languages is not just a linguistic task but a political act that mediates access to rights, representation, and redress.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, translation became crucial in disseminating public health information. In India, the failure to translate health advisories into minority languages or dialects led to misinformation, fear, and increased vulnerability. The state's selective translation practices reinforced existing hierarchies of language and power, demonstrating how the politics of translation can have life-and-death consequences.

Translation becomes critically important in zones of conflict, where it can shape narratives, influence international perception, and impact life-or-death decisions. Interpreters working in war zones or during peace negotiations serve as the bridge between opposing factions, often under enormous pressure (Baker, 2006).

In Kashmir, for instance, journalists and human rights organizations rely on translators to convey testimonies of violence and resistance. The interpreter's role in such cases is not only to transfer meaning but to ensure the speaker's story retains its emotional and political force. Yet, as Mona Baker (2006) argues, the translator's position is fraught—they can be perceived as partial, manipulated, or even traitorous depending on the narrative they help communicate.

3.2. The Ethics of Translation: Feminist, Transnational and Care-Based Perspectives

Feminist theorists have long pointed out that translation is a gendered practice. Sherry Simon (1996) argues that feminist translation challenges the authority of the original text and foregrounds the translator's agency. By making visible the interventions of the translator, feminist translation disrupts the traditional hierarchy between author and translator. It also brings to the fore the ethics of care, embodiment, and situated knowledge.

Carolyn Shread (2009) extends this argument by proposing a model of 'translational feminism' that emphasizes multiplicity, relationality, and accountability. Translators must be attentive not only to linguistic fidelity but also to the affective, cultural, and political dimensions of the text. In this sense, translation becomes a practice of ethical engagement, of listening and responding to the other.

The ethics of care, as developed by feminist philosophers like Joan Tronto, can offer valuable insights into translation practice. Care ethics emphasizes attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. Applied to translation, it means being attentive to the speaker's voice, being responsible for the choices one makes in rendering that voice, being competent in understanding the socio-cultural nuances, and being responsive to the impact of one's translation.

This approach is particularly relevant in translating texts by or about marginalized communities—women, Dalits, indigenous peoples, or refugees. Translators must be aware of their own positionality and the power dynamics involved in speaking for or about others. As Mona Baker (2006) argues, translators often occupy a dual position of proximity and distance, which requires a heightened ethical awareness.

Translation is central to how postcolonial states like India function administratively. With 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of dialects, state functioning depends on translation. Government notifications, parliamentary proceedings, and legal documents often exist in multiple languages. However, as Annamalai (2005) notes, translation within bureaucracies is not always accurate or culturally sensitive.

Often, English texts are translated into Hindi or regional languages using rigid templates, which can strip them of nuance and clarity. These issues have direct political consequences. Poor translations can lead to policy misinterpretations, legal ambiguities, and exclusions. In the legal system, for example, mistranslations of witness statements or legal texts can affect trial outcomes (Bhatia, 2010). In such spaces, translation is a matter of procedural justice.

“Feminist care ethics is a critical theory more and more academic fields are applying conceptually and in research praxis. Translation is a type of caring whose provisions we have yet to fully consider. This article explores the ways the needs, desires and values expressed in feminist translation studies share common articulations with feminist care ethics. Within care theory, translation scholars can find useful framing and conceptual tools, and discover meeting points for working more closely with the many fields where transnational feminist work is being undertaken with less attention or reflection upon the logistics and politics of interlinguistic exchange. The article will briefly outline feminist care ethics; analyse the ways its premises are suited to transnational feminist translation and consider potential

applications for a feminist ethic of care to the study and practice of translation.” (Anderson, 2025, pp. 135).

Feminist theorists have challenged the masculinist foundations of traditional translation theories that prize universality, objectivity, and timelessness. As scholars like Luise von Flotow (1997) and Sherry Simon (2005) argue, translation has historically been viewed through a masculine lens that sidelines the embodied, contextual, and affective dimensions of meaning.

Translation, they argue, is often shaped by the politics of its time and place, even while purporting neutrality. Feminist translation theory foregrounds the translator’s subjectivity and emphasizes visibility, rejecting the myth of the “invisible translator.” It also raises questions about the gendered dynamics of authority in translation. Who gets to translate? Whose texts are translated? How are feminist voices reinterpreted—or erased—when translated across cultures?

Spivak’s (1993) call for respecting the “opacity” of the Other resonates with feminist ethics, which prioritize care, relationality, and reflexivity. In translating texts by Dalit women, tribal communities, or survivors of violence, feminist ethics urge caution against appropriation or sanitization. Translation should not domesticate resistance; it must preserve discomfort, tension, and dissent.

International organizations such as the UN or the EU rely on interpreters who do more than relay language—they mediate cultures. An interpreter in diplomatic negotiations must understand tone, idiom, and body language to ensure that the speaker’s intent is faithfully conveyed. Baigorri-Jalón (2014) argues that interpreters are ‘cultural brokers,’ often smoothing over tensions or managing misunderstandings during high-stakes engagements.

This cultural brokerage becomes especially critical in humanitarian contexts, such as refugee camps, where interpreters must navigate trauma, displacement, and bureaucracy. In such roles, interpreters carry an ethical burden. Their work can determine whether a person receives asylum, medical help, or legal protection. “Internationalization challenges Anglophone translation studies by putting forward the fact that the excessive emphasis on the perspectives emanating from the centre poses a problem of power relations that can only be tackled by becoming open to other languages (and to the accompanying perspectives and interests along with them). This is discussion FTS scholars often include in their scholarship since decolonising international publishing is necessary and meaningful for feminist scholars, both in the periphery and the centre.” (Aguilar, 2024, pp.15) In the era of globalization and digital media, translation plays a role in shaping global public opinion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, public health information had to be translated

rapidly into multiple languages. Mistranslations led to misinformation, vaccine hesitancy, and confusion, particularly among marginalized communities.

Another example is the translation of international treaties into local languages. When India ratified the Paris Climate Agreement, the translated versions of its obligations circulated in regional languages were often oversimplified or legally vague, creating space for interpretive discretion by local authorities.

“In terms of its geopolitical expansion, the field of feminist translation studies has also been enhanced by the work of scholars, educators, activists and practitioners coming from a variety of academic traditions and disciplinary backgrounds, who conduct and publish their research in multiple languages and/or following different academic language conventions. These contributors are extensively discussing not only case studies contextualized in a wider range of political, social and cultural spaces, but also navigating renewed epistemologies, teaching practices, and (re)visiting the ethics of feminist translation from their distinct situated positions.” (Castro and Sportuno, 2024, pp. 1-5). “This epistemological and geopolitical growth has been reflected in and fuelled by an equally increasing number of conferences, symposia and thematic panels devoted to addressing different facets of the field, framed both within translation studies and feminist studies.” (Castro and Sportuno, 2024, pp. 5)

Castro also argues, that “the term “transnational” itself is understood very differently in different disciplines and scholarly traditions, as well as in different geographies. For example, it has important “shortcomings in cultural studies” (Vatanabadi 2009), where “transnational” is often understood as simply transcending national borders and therefore losing the strong political and counter-hegemonic character it has in transnational feminism and reducing its possibilities. I would argue the same applies in translation studies, and this became evident when the special issue “Towards Transnational Feminist Translation” (Castro, Ergun, Flotow, and Sportuno 2020) was being prepared for the Latin American translation journal *Mutatis Mutandis*. We received over forty proposals, mostly from translation studies scholars, with barely one third actually engaging with the term “transnational” as had been described in the call for papers and in “transnational feminism,” while the rest seemed to understand “transnational” simply as a buzzword. Indeed, outside Anglo-American scholarship, “transnational feminism” is still a quite obscure notion. I have been questioned about it several times, from different perspectives: once a Chilean colleague voiced her reservations against the term for its alleged parallels with big transnational corporations. In sum, the “transnational” lives a life in translation.” (Castro et al., 2024, pp. 14)

The translation of environmental treaties and climate discourse often erases the voices of indigenous communities whose epistemologies and cosmologies are not easily translatable into the technocratic language of international law. Translation in these contexts becomes an act of epistemic violence, privileging certain ways of knowing while marginalizing others.

In the translation of Dalit literature from regional languages into English, questions arise about who translates, for whom, and with what effects. While translation can bring visibility to marginalized voices, it can also exoticize, sanitize, or appropriate them. The translator must navigate these tensions with care and humility.

Similarly, translation in gender-based violence documentation requires sensitivity to both the linguistic and affective dimensions of testimony. Standardized forms and legal terminology may strip away the emotional weight of the survivor's narrative. The ethical translator must find ways to preserve the speaker's voice without compromising intelligibility or institutional requirements.

4. Conclusion: Toward an Ethical and Inclusive Practice of Translation

Translation is a deeply political and ethical practice, particularly in the multilingual, conflictual, and hierarchical contexts of the Global South. It is not simply about linguistic transfer but about mediating meaning, negotiating power, and embodying responsibility. Drawing on postcolonial theory, feminist ethics, and critical discourse analysis, this paper has argued for a rethinking of translation as a site of epistemic and political struggle. The translator is not a neutral conduit but an ethical agent who must navigate the complex terrain of voice, representation, and power.

Future research and practice must focus on developing frameworks for ethical translation that are attentive to context, power asymmetries, and the lived realities of marginalized communities. This includes training translators not only in linguistic skills but also in critical and ethical reflexivity. Only then can translation become a truly transformative and emancipatory practice. Translation is not a neutral or purely technical act—it is a site where power is negotiated and meaning is contested. Whether in the realm of international diplomacy, legal justice, literature, or public policy, translation shapes what gets said, who gets heard, and what is left out. Through the use of discourse analysis and feminist ethics, this paper emphasizes the urgency of approaching translation as a politically loaded, historically situated, and ethically complex practice.

For scholars, translators, and interpreters working in multilingual societies, there is a pressing need to adopt a political and ethical lens toward translation practices. This involves recognizing one's positionality, ensuring accountability, and acknowledging that translation is not merely about accuracy but about justice.

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