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Original Paper

A Comparative Study of Gender Language Differences in Two Translation Versions of To the Lighthouse from the Perspective of Feminist Translation

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Abstract

To the Lighthouse is a modernist literary classic by Virginia Woolf that integrates feminist ideology and stream-of-consciousness narrative. This study, taking Qu Shijing and Ma Ainong's translations as examples, explores how the three major feminist translation strategies are reflected in the Gender Language Differences of different translators from the perspective of feminist translation theory. The research finds that translators of different genders employ different translation strategies to achieve their translation goals. Female translators are more inclined to actively intervene in the text content and use strategies such as "hijacking" and "supplementation" to realize the characteristics of female discourse and construct female discourse power. However, male translators often favor faithful expressions. By preserving the grammatical structure of the original text, selecting neutral terms, or diminishing gender-related metaphors, they bring the translated text closer to conventional literary standards. Their intervention strategies tend to be more implicit and restrained. The research provides an empirical case from a perspective for the study of feminist literary translation, highlighting that translation is not only a language conversion but also a field where gender concepts collide.

Keywords

Feminist translation theory, To the Lighthouse, gender language differences

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* stands as a quintessential work of modernist literature, with its "feminine sentence" theory and stream-of-consciousness narrative profoundly illustrating female subjectivity. Through the domestic labor of Mrs. Ramsay and the artistic struggles of Lily Briscoe, the

novel unveils the patriarchal discipline imposed on women. The two significant Chinese translations of this work—Ma Ainong's version (2003, People's Literature Publishing House) and Qu Shijing's version (2009, Shanghai Translation Publishing House)—were published six years apart, coinciding with a pivotal phase in China's feminist discourse transitioning from theoretical introduction to localized practice. This paper examines the differences in gendered language between the two translations, revealing the practical application of feminist translation theory and exploring how translation contributes to the construction of gender discourse. This research not only deepens the understanding of Woolf's work but also provides valuable insights for feminist literary translation practices within the Chinese context.

2. Feminist Translation and Gender Language Differences

Feminism, as a social movement focusing on gender equality, provides the theoretical foundation and core stance for the feminist translation perspective that emerged in the 1980s, which is the practical application of the former in the field of translation. At the same time, feminist translation offers a value orientation for the selection of gender language differences; while gender language differences serve as the key tool for the implementation of feminist translation concepts.

2.1 Feminism and Feminist Translation Theory

In the 1880s, the word "feminis" first appeared in the English language. The Chinese translation of "feminis" actually reflects differences in cultural context. The modern feminist movement originated in the United States and has generally undergone three major development waves. The first wave of feminism began in the late 19th century and lasted until the 1960s; the second wave was closely related to social structure changes and the awakening of gender consciousness; while the third wave began in the late 20th century and intertwined with various trends such as deconstructionism, feminism, post-colonial theory, demonstrating a high degree of diversity and inclusiveness. This development process not only reflects the complexity of gender issues but also demonstrates the continuous evolution and expansion of feminist theories in the context of globalization (Liu Junping, 2009: 468).

Feminist translation theory emerged in the 1980s, emphasizing that translators should actively intervene in the text to reveal the suppressed female voices and inject a gender perspective into translation studies. The main representatives such as Shirley Simon, Barbara Gaudal, and Louise von Flotow have made significant contributions to the development of this theory. Louise von Flotow proposed three core strategies: "hijacking", "supplementing", and "prefacing and footnoting" in 1997, clearly stating that feminist translators should "be true to their own feminist writing plans" rather than relying on the original text or the author (Liu Junping, 2009: 475). Additionally, Shirley Simon (1996) redefined the meaning of "faithfulness", highlighting the subjectivity of women in the generation of meaning (Simon, 1996: 29). Barbara Gaudal (1989) divided translation into two analytical dimensions of literal translation and free translation from the perspective of translation practice, enriching the practical path of the theory. Since 2000, the feminist translation perspective has entered China as a new force and quickly attracted the

attention of many scholars. In 2004, this theory completed a crucial "ice-breaking". Zhang Jinghua, while deconstructing the gender bias and binary opposition structure of traditional translation, first systematically demonstrated how language manipulation can achieve equality between the original text and the translation, redefining translation as a "rewriting" practice that highlights female discourse power; in the same year, Jiang Xiaohua and Xu Laixi respectively sorted out this theory from different perspectives, and the three core strategies were concretized, laying an operational framework for subsequent cultural intervention and strengthening of female consciousness. In 2007, the introduction of the perspective of reception aesthetics further exposed the practical resistance faced by the dissemination of this theory in the local context, reversing the push for scholars to reflect on its applicable conditions (Yang Liu, 2007). In 2016, the feminist translation perspective began to enter the stage of practical extension, being implanted in translation teaching: the classroom no longer merely trains language conversion skills, but uses the gender perspective to awaken students' subject consciousness and critical literacy (2016, Chen Weihong, Zeng Lingqin). In conclusion, the twenty-plus-year cross-cultural journey not only constructed a set of translation methodological approaches oriented by gender consciousness, but also continuously expanded the social value and theoretical vitality of translation studies.

2.2 Gender Language Differences

There is a certain correlation between gender and language usage. Female language often exhibits more subtle, polite and emotional expression tendencies, while male language tends to be more direct, decisive and instrumental. This difference in language style is not only due to physiological factors, but is also influenced by the social and cultural construction of gender roles. Feminist language studies further emphasize that language is not only a tool reflecting gender differences, but also an important means of constructing gender identity. In translation practice, it is particularly important to pay attention to the gender ideology hidden behind the language (Qian Jin, 2004). However, due to the complexity of the relationship between language and gender, the view that female language is more subtle is inevitably limited and overly simplistic. The gender language differences are specifically manifested in aspects such as vocabulary selection, sentence structure, and tone expression. In literary translation, the way translators handle these language features directly affects readers' perception of the characters' personalities, emotions, and social roles. Therefore, from a feminist perspective, translators need to pay special attention to how to reproduce the gender consciousness in the original text through language.

3. Analysis of the Differences between the Translations of *To the Lighthouse* by Ma Ainong and Qu Shijing

Among the many translations of *To the Lighthouse*, the versions by Qu Shijing and Ma Ainong are quite representative. Ma Ainong pays attention to expressing the psychology and emotions of women, offsetting the male-centered perspective and gender stereotypes in the original text. Qu Shijing's translation focuses more on preserving the language style and literary beauty of the original work, and is closer to the original in handling the androgynous theme, with precise word choice. From the perspective

of translation subjectivity, Xu Jun (2003) proposed that translation subjectivity is manifested in the translator's active consciousness and creative thinking during the translation process, and its existence or absence directly affects the ultimate value of the translation. This is particularly evident in the two translations: Ma Ainong intervenes with a feminist perspective, while Qu Shijing adheres to the traditional "faithfulness" perspective in translation. The differences between the two not only reflect the profound influence of gender perspective on the translation, but also reveal the divergence of the translator's subject consciousness.

3.1 Prefacing and Footnoting

The feminist translation theory regards translation as a political act, aiming to restructure the gender identity of women through language. Louise von Frottow (1997) pointed out that by prefacing and footnoting, female translators can describe the translation process, explain the background and meaning of the original text, thereby enabling readers to better understand the work and the author's feelings at that time, and also highlighting the subjectivity of female translators.

Example 1

Ma's translation: "历来关于伍尔夫的批评，大多针对她的人物；人物性格通常借助情节展现，所以连带涉及情节；此外还怪她视野太过狭。以上两种意见，姑且不置可否，有一点须得指出：批评者一不智是论家还是读者一一一所希望获得的，莫尔夫压根儿不打算供给，她另外奉献一些别的。" (Ma Ainong, 2003:1)

Qu's translation: "阅读了《灯塔》之后再来阅读任何一本普通的小说，会使你觉得自己是离开了白天的光芒面投身到木偶和纸板做成的世界中去。" (Qu Shijing, 2009:18)

The prefacing section annotated in Ma's translation not only analyzed Woolf's creative techniques but also implicitly criticized the biases against female writers in traditional criticism, suggesting that Woolf's works were not created to conform to traditional literary standards but rather had their own unique feminist value. In contrast, the prefacing part of Qu's translation focused more on the traditional approach, concentrating on the literary value and creative techniques of the novel. Although the prefacing quoted evaluations from other scholars to emphasize the literary nature of the work, it did not deeply explore the gender issues. Although Qu's translation analyzed Woolf's creative techniques, it did not explain the gender significance from a feminist perspective. It can be said that this difference in preface writing reflects the varying degrees of emphasis on feminist thought between the two translators.

Example 2

so that she had only strength enough to move her finger. (Virginia Woolf, 1994:33)

Ma's translation: 她的力气仅够用手指在格林童话①书页上移动；① "指格林兄弟的童话《渔夫和他的妻子》，这里暗示拉姆齐夫妇之间潜在的差异和分歧。" (Ma Ainong, 2003:33)

Qu's translation: (在极度疲惫的状态之中)她只剩一点儿力气，还能动一动手指头来翻阅格林童话。(Qu Shijing, 2009:45)

The translator has few footnotes in the text. What is notable is that when Mrs. Ramsay was reading the story *The Fisherman and His Wife* to James, the story itself had obvious gender metaphors. In the story,

the fisherman represented the male, while his wife represented the female. The wife constantly asked the fisherman to seek a higher status from the eel, which ultimately led to their lives changing from happy to miserable. This story has traditionally been interpreted as a critique of women's greed and dissatisfaction. The Ma translation, by pointing out "potential differences and contradictions", implies the gender inequality in the relationship between Ramsay and his wife. This inequality may be reflected in the contradiction between Ramsay's dependence on his wife and his pursuit of his own achievements, as well as the conflict between Ramsay's wife's role in the family and society. The two translations indicate that the male translator did not provide footnotes for this part, and there are certain differences in expression between the two genders.

3.2 Supplementing

In feminist translation theory, the supplementation strategy refers to the intentional addition of content by the translator to reveal the implicit female experiences, emotions or resistance consciousness in the original text, fill in the gender meaning gap, and enhance the visibility of female experiences and resistance consciousness in the translation. Barbara Gaudal (1989) proposed that translation is "production rather than reproduction", and the supplementation strategy is based on this, aiming to counter the history of women being marginalized in language; the translator can use it to highlight the implicit gender power relations in the original text, strengthen the narrative perspective of women as the emotional subjects of the family, and thereby break the marginal position of women in language.

Example 3

if you were married, not to see your wife, not to know how your children were。(Virginia Woolf, 1994:5)

Ma's translation: 如果你家有妻室，你见不到自己的妻子，也不知道孩子是否平安。(Ma Ainong, 2003:3)

Qu's translation: 如果你结了婚，你看不到自己的妻子，也不知道自己的儿女情况如何。(Qu Shijing, 2009:3)

The author merely uses "married" to indicate the marital status and "how" to represent the child's condition. The Ma translation adds the word "平安" to enhance the existence of the female as the emotional subject of the family in the Chinese context. Although the word "妻室" has a traditional gender imprint, its translation strategy objectively makes the female's emotional labor and family role more visible in the text, which conforms to the feminist translation theory that "through rewriting, female experiences can be seen". The Qu translation focuses on fidelity and does not explicitly reconstruct the gender power relationship. It adopts the parallel structure of "妻子" and "儿女", retains the male perspective of the original text, and does not strengthen the unique position of women in the family emotional network through language forms. The expression "情况如何" is relatively neutral, weakening the emotional tension conveyed by "平安" in the Ma translation. The differences between the two translations reflect the different theoretical positions of the translators on "whether female emotions need to be particularly highlighted in translation".

Example 4

Or if one thought of her simply as a woman, one must endow her with some freak of idiosyncrasy——she did not like admiration—or suppose some latent desire to doff her royalty of form as if her beauty bored her and all that men say of beauty, and she wanted only to be like other people, insignificant. (Virginia Woolf, 1994:25-26)

Ma's translation: 如果你只把她看成一个女人，一定还要赋予她某种独特的个性——她不喜欢听人赞美——或者假设她有某种潜在的欲望，想摒弃高贵的风度，仿佛她的美丽令她厌倦，男人谈论美貌的话也令她厌倦，她只想和别人一样，做个凡人。(Ma Ainong, 2003:25)

Qu's translation: 或者，如果你仅仅把她当作一个女人来看待，你就会赋予她一些奇特的怪癖——她不喜欢被人倾慕——或者她有某种潜在的愿望，要抛弃她优雅高贵的仪表，好像美貌和所有男子们对美貌的赞扬都叫她厌烦，而她别无所求，但愿能和其他人一样，平平常常。(Qu Shijing, 2009:34)

The term "freak of idiosyncrasy" carries a certain negative connotation. The Qu translation uses "怪癖", while the Ma translation opts for "独特的个性", using positive words to mitigate the slight negative meaning of the original text and instead emphasizing the unique value of the female trait, granting women the rationality to reject regulation. This aligns with feminist construction of "female subjectivity". The differences between the two translations indicate that female translators in translation practice tend to intervene in the text with gender consciousness and through strategic rewriting to highlight the value of female subjectivity; while male translators, due to cultural cognitive inertia, may unconsciously continue the traditional gender discourse system and relatively less actively challenge the existing gender power structure, resulting in significantly different degrees of presentation of feminist positions in the translations.

3.3 Hijacking

"Hijacking" is the most controversial and problematic translation strategy of Flowto. It refers to the act of reusing and adapting the original text by feminist translators in order to achieve their political goals, thereby distorting or completely altering the original author's intentions. Simon (1996) argues that "Hijacking is the theft of the text by feminist translators. It is the practice of reinterpreting an originally text without necessarily having feminist intentions and incorporating it into the feminist discourse system." Feminist translation aims to break the dominance of male discourse and highlight female consciousness as its core objective. The hijacking strategy is a special way to serve this goal: In traditional translation, a large number of texts are dominated by the male perspective, and gender issues are often concealed. Translators use the hijacking strategy to rewrite and hijack the source text, especially in literary translation, it can achieve the purpose of reinterpreting and reconstructing the text that contains implicit gender consciousness, and even change the original meaning to strengthen female consciousness.

Example 5

Insinuating, too, as she did the greatness of man's intellect, even in its decay, the subjection of all wives—not that she blamed the girl, and the marriage had been happy enough, she believed—to their husband's

labours, she made him feel better pleased with himself than he had done yet, and he would have liked, had they taken a cab, for example, to have paid the fare. (Virginia Woolf, 1994:9)

Ma's translation: 她暗示男人具有高度的睿智——即使穷困潦倒也不逊色，又暗示所有的妻子都应该支持丈夫的事业——她不是责怪那个姑娘，而且她相信那场婚姻够得上美满。(Ma Ainong, 2003:8)

Qu's translation: 拉姆齐夫人独具慧眼，竟然能赏识在穷困潦倒之中的男子的高度才华，并且承认所有当妻子的——她并不责怪那位姑娘，并且相信他们的结合曾经是幸福的——都要顺从地支持她们丈夫的工作。(Qu Shijing, 2009:10)

The translation of "subjection" by Qu carries a patriarchal connotation, implying a power relationship of "wife's subordination and obedience to the husband". It is a textual manifestation of the traditional gender order. It should be translated as "所有的妻子都应该支持丈夫的事业". On the contrary, the female translator restructures "subjection" as "支持", weakening the passivity of the original "subordination", giving the wife's behavior an active and proactive semantic meaning. Through vocabulary substitution, it eliminates the discipline of patriarchy on the wife's role, which is a typical "hijacking". That is, it covers the original passive gender power with an active semantic meaning, namely, covering the passive subordinate gender power with an active one. Moreover, the original text conveys the superiority of male intelligence - "the greatness of man's intellect". Ma translates it as "男人具有高度的睿智——即使穷困潦倒也不逊色", while retaining the expression of male intellectual superiority. However, combined with the active rewriting of the female role, he replaces "subordination" with "support" in the text, weakening the absoluteness of male intellectual hegemony in the text's power field. This allows the woman to transform from a "dependent" to a "supporter", leveraging the implicit deconstruction of the singleity of male intellectual authority in the text to achieve "hijacking". In contrast, male translators translate it as "竟然能赏识在穷困潦倒之中的男子的高度才华?", "赏识" once reinforced the passive admiration of women for male intelligence, consolidating the patriarchal intellectual hegemony. In comparison, the male translation style and content are more faithful to the original text, to some extent, strengthening the traditional gender intellectual power difference.

Example 6

Yet, as the night wore on, and white lights parted the curtains, and even now and then some bird chirped in the garden, gathering a desperate courage she would urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it; she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that; and so have to meet a serious stare from eyes of unparalleled depth, and confront Mrs Ramsay's simple certainty (and she was childlike now) that her dear Lily, her little Brisk, was a fool. (Virginia Woolf, 1994:42)

Ma's translation: 这时，夜已消失，白色的晨光撩开天幕，花园里间或传来鸟儿的啁瞅，这时她鼓起全部的勇气，强调自己不受常规的制约：她竭力解释她愿意孑然一身：她愿意无牵无挂；常规对她来讲不合适；于是她不得不面对拉姆齐夫人那双无比深邃的眼睛对她的深深凝视，不得不接受拉姆齐夫人简单而自信的推断（她现在真像个孩子）：她的亲爱的莉丽、她的小布里斯科真是个傻瓜。(Ma Ainong, 2003:44)

Qu's translation: 夜晚已经消逝，晨曦揭开了帘幕，鸟儿不时在花园里啁啾，她拚命鼓足勇气，竭力主张她本人应该排除在这普遍的规律之外；这是她所祈求的命运；她喜欢独身；她喜欢保持自己的本色；她生来就是要作老处女的；这样，她就不得不遇到拉姆齐夫人无比深邃的双目严厉的一瞥，不得不当面聆听拉姆齐夫人坦率的教诲（她现在简直像个孩子）：她亲爱的莉丽，她的小布里斯库，可真是个小傻瓜。(Qu Shijing, 2009:60)

The term "universal law" in the original text alludes to the discipline under the patriarchal system where "women are bound to marriage as their ultimate destination". In the Ma translation, it emphasizes that Lily is not constrained by the conventional norms and strives to explain that she prefers to be alone and without any ties or burdens. It attempts to explain that the conventional norms are not suitable for her, transforming "emphasizing her independence from conventional norms" into an active choice of celibacy, highlighting the agency and subjectivity of women, and deconstructing the hegemonic logic of the patriarchal system that marriage is the inevitable destination for women. The female translator, through semantic reconstruction, gives women an active stance of resisting traditional discipline. On the contrary, the Qu translation emphasizes that this is the fate that Lily desires. She likes being alone, likes to maintain her true self, and is born to be a virgin. "生来就是要作老处女的" has a passive and disciplined connotation, suggesting that women's celibacy is a defined fate rather than an active choice by women, and cannot fully highlight the agency of women.

In summary, Ma Ainong, as a contemporary female translator, reconstructs the text from a feminist perspective and emphasizes highlighting the gender consciousness in the original work through language strategies. In terms of translation style, Ma Ainong is accustomed to presenting her translations with delicate and gender-conscious language. Her language adheres to feminist translation concepts and tends to use expressions that can highlight the female subject and experience. In terms of vocabulary selection, she often accurately captures the emotional and conscious flow of female characters in the original text, using rich vocabulary to convey subtle psychology. When translating *To the Lighthouse*, she, as a female translator, consciously intervened with feminist translation strategies such as "hijacking" and "supplementing", deconstructing patriarchal norms. For instance, she strengthened the emotional labor and subject value of Mrs. Ramsay's domestic work behind the scenes, making the translation a carrier that showcases female consciousness and conveys feminist ideas. In contrast, Qu Shijing's translation, as a representative of male translators, tends to follow the "fidelity" principle in traditional translation theories and adopts a relatively neutral approach to the gender discourse in the original text. His language style is more plain and objective, focusing on maintaining the narrative structure and literary aesthetics of the original text, and rarely actively intervenes in the expression of gender discourse. When dealing with texts like *To the Lighthouse* that contain feminist connotations, in terms of vocabulary selection, he tends to use neutral and conventional expressions that conform to literary translation norms; in sentence structure processing, he mostly follows the grammatical logic of the original text, striving to accurately convey the literal information. Qu Shijing's translation of *To the Lighthouse* allows readers to feel the faithful presentation of the original narrative, facilitating an understanding of Woolf's modernist writing

style and the unique rhythm of stream-of-consciousness narration.

4. Conclusion

To the Lighthouse is a classic work by Virginia Woolf. Under the guidance of feminist translation theory, my study of the translations by Ma Ainong and Qu Shijing not only deepened my understanding of Woolf's works but also revealed how different gender translators influence readers' perception of gender discourse in the text through their respective language styles. The three major strategies proposed by feminist translation theory - "hijacking", "supplementing", and "prefacing and footnoting" - serve as the theoretical basis for analyzing the differences in gender language styles between the two translations. The female translator Ma Ainong actively intervened in the text with a strong sense of gender, using the three strategies to deconstruct patriarchal discipline and highlight female experience and subjectivity. While the male translator Qu Shijing focused more on the faithful conveyance of the surface meaning of the original text, his intervention in gender power relations was weaker, objectively continuing the traditional gender narrative approach. Therefore, different translation orientations will directly affect the reading experience of readers. The Ma translation guides readers to pay attention to the emotional labor of women in the family and society and their potential resistance consciousness, while the Qu translation may cause readers to overlook the implicit gender inequality issues in the text. Translation is not only a process of language conversion but also a practical field of gender politics. Feminist translation strategies provide methodological support for reconstructing gender discourse in literature, and the translator's gender identity and theoretical stance will determine whether translation can become an important force for promoting gender equality.

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