

Translating Silence—Gender, Trauma, and the Untranslatable in Postcolonial Asian Literature

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The translation of gendered trauma in postcolonial Asian literature remains a complex and often contested process, shaped by a confluence of linguistic, cultural, and ideological frameworks that significantly influence how narratives of suffering, silence, and resistance are mediated and received across transnational borders (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999). In postcolonial contexts, literature by writers from Asia—particularly those from historically marginalised or gendered positions—frequently functions as a site of both resistance and negotiation, challenging dominant epistemologies and disrupting colonial and patriarchal structures (Mohanty, 1988; Suleri, 1992). These narratives often deploy strategies of silence, fragmentation, and culturally embedded expressions of trauma that resist straightforward interpretation and challenge dominant western paradigms of feminist discourse and trauma theory (Caruth, 1996). For instance, texts may employ what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) calls the ‘rhetoric of the subaltern,’ where silence and gaps in the narrative symbolise resistance to hegemonic discourses and reflect a refusal to conform to the expectations of the colonial gaze.

Despite an increasing scholarly focus on translation as a political and ethical act (Venuti, 1995; Tymoczko, 2000), significant gaps persist in understanding how translation mediates the representation of gendered oppression and whether it inadvertently contributes to epistemic violence—a term coined by Spivak to describe the silencing of marginalised voices through the imposition of dominant cultural narratives. Translators, situated between cultures, often face the challenge of navigating between fidelity to the source text and the demands of the target audience (Simon, 1996). In doing so, they may inadvertently privilege certain cultural and ideological frameworks over others, thereby distorting or even erasing the radical potential of the original narrative (Chamberlain, 1988). Translation, then, does not simply transmit meaning; it actively constructs meaning, reshaping how gendered trauma is understood and received within global literary and academic circuits (Venuti, 2013). As Homi Bhabha’s (1994) notion of the ‘third space’ suggests, translation could offer a space for negotiation and hybridisation; however, it often risks becoming a site of cultural appropriation, where the complexities of gendered trauma are oversimplified to fit normative western understandings (Sakai, 1997).

This distortion is particularly evident in how western translation practices have historically approached postcolonial Asian literature. Texts characterised by

fragmented structures, elliptical storytelling, and culturally specific symbols are often adapted or reframed to align with western literary conventions, stripping them of their subversive power (Spivak, 1992). For example, when translating works like Mahasweta Devi's stories or Yūko Tsushima's novels, translators might domesticate elements that resist western feminist paradigms, such as non-linear narratives that reflect cyclical experiences of trauma or culturally specific metaphors that convey resilience through silence rather than vocal opposition. This not only flattens the text's cultural specificity but also perpetuates a form of neo-orientalism, where the complexity of Asian women's experiences is rendered more palatable for western consumption (Liu, 1995; Niranjana, 1992).

Moreover, the ideological reframing inherent in translation can undermine the political potency of these narratives. When translation prioritises accessibility over accuracy, the narratives risk becoming depoliticised (Venuti, 1998). For instance, in the translation of postcolonial feminist texts, there is often a tendency to foreground universalist feminist themes while marginalising local feminist struggles that intersect with issues of class, caste, and colonialism (Mohanty, 2003). This selective framing can contribute to what Mohanty (1988) critiques as 'under Western eyes,' where third-world women's texts are appropriated to affirm western feminist agendas rather than acknowledging the intersectional realities these texts articulate. By contrast, more critically engaged approaches to translation can highlight the resistant potential of linguistic and cultural untranslatability, positioning translation as an act of solidarity rather than appropriation (Tymoczko, 2010).

This special issue seeks to foreground scholarship at the intersections of literary studies, translation studies, gender studies, and postcolonial studies, exploring how translation functions as both a site of resistance and a means of ideological transformation in the transmission of gendered trauma. We invite contributions that critically examine the ethical dilemmas, theoretical challenges, and political stakes involved in translating postcolonial texts that engage with silence, loss, and resistance.

We welcome contributions that address, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- Silence, erasure, and untranslatability as feminist and postcolonial strategies in literature from Asia
- Translation as a site of resistance: how translation preserves or erases marginalised voices
- The ethics of translating trauma narratives: fidelity, adaptation, and ideological framing
- Postcolonial feminist translation theories and their application to Asian, Middle Eastern, and diasporic texts
- Case studies of misinterpretation, erasure, or amplification of gendered suffering in translation

- The role of translators as mediators of feminist and anti-colonial discourse in cross-cultural contexts
- Strategies for translating culturally specific metaphors, idioms, and epistemologies of oppression and resistance
- Untranslatability as a form of defiance: How do untranslated words, idioms, or silences function in feminist and trauma narratives?
- Reception studies: How have English translations shaped the global perception of these texts?

Submission Guidelines

We invite abstracts of 200-250 words, accompanied by a bio note of no more than 100 words. PhD scholars are also encouraged to contribute.

- **Deadline for abstract submission:** 15 May 2025
- **Notification of acceptance:** 30 May 2025
- **Full paper submission deadline:** 30 November 2025
- **Publication date:** Second half of 2026

Please send your submissions to Moussa Pourya Asl [moussa.pouryaAsl@oulu.fi] and Roya Monsefi [r.monsefi@azaruniv.ac.ir]

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For any inquiries, please contact the editors at the above email. We look forward to your contributions.

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