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

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This special issue, 'Translating Silence—Gender, Trauma, and the Untranslatable in Postcolonial Asian Literature,' seeks to foreground scholarship at the intersections of literary studies, translation studies, gender studies, and postcolonial studies, with the aim of exploring how translation functions as both a site of resistance and a means of ideological transformation in the transmission of gendered trauma. Central to the contributions in this issue is the recognition that the translation of gendered trauma in postcolonial Asian literature is neither a neutral act of linguistic transfer nor a transparent conduit of cultural exchange. Rather, it is a politically charged and ethically fraught process in which histories of colonialism, patriarchy, caste, and global capital intersect. This recognition underscores the prevailing argument that translation in postcolonial contexts is inextricable from asymmetrical power relations that shape which texts travel, how they are framed, and how they are received.[1]

Over the past three decades, scholarship in translation studies,[2] feminist theory, and postcolonial studies has foregrounded translation as a site of ideological negotiation.[3] For example, Tejaswini Niranjana demonstrates how colonial translation practices functioned as instruments of epistemic domination and produced the colonised subject as legible within imperial discourse.[4] In a similar way, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak conceptualises epistemic violence as the silencing that occurs when subaltern voices are appropriated or ventriloquised through dominant frameworks.[5] In a later work, Spivak extends this critique to translation itself and maintains that translators attend to the rhetoricity and singularity of the original,

[1] Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2002).

[2] Ruselle Meade, Claire Shih, and Kyung Hye Kim, eds. *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Translation* (Routledge, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003251699.

[3] Lawrence Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2012), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203074428.

[4] Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (University of California Press, 1992).

[5] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Macmillan Education LTD, 1988).

especially in texts authored by women from the Global South.[6] For Spivak, translation must resist the quick-fix of global readability and instead cultivate an intimate, patient engagement with linguistic and cultural difference.

Such concerns acquire urgency in the context of gendered trauma narratives which the works in this collection address. Scholars working in postcolonial contexts have demonstrated that trauma in the Global South is often embedded in ongoing structural violence—colonial dispossession, caste hierarchies, communal conflict, and neoliberal precarity—rather than singular catastrophic events.[7] Building upon this foundation, the contributors to this issue explore how gendered trauma in particular frequently manifests through strategies of silence, indirection, cyclical temporality, and culturally specific metaphors that resist assimilation into dominant western paradigms of confession or testimonial disclosure. It is noteworthy that when gendered suffering is abstracted from its local histories of caste, religion, and colonialism, it risks being reinscribed within liberal feminist narratives that erase intersectional specificity. Translation, as a primary vehicle of transnational circulation, is central to this dynamic.[8] In postcolonial Asian contexts, as the articles in this collection demonstrate, gendered metaphors intersect with racialised and Orientalist imaginaries which compound the risk of distortion.

Moreover, translation operates within what Homi K. Bhabha terms the third space—a site of negotiation and hybridity.[9] While this space can enable creative rearticulation, it can also become a terrain of appropriation. When Asian women's trauma narratives are translated for global markets, they often enter circuits shaped by publishing economies, festival cultures, and prize systems that privilege certain thematic and stylistic features.[10] The result may be what Emily Apter calls the politics of untranslatability: a struggle over what must remain opaque, resistant, or linguistically irreducible.[11] The studies included in this special issue contribute to this intellectual tradition by showing how the stakes of these debates extend beyond print culture. In an era increasingly mediated by digital technologies, as some of the works in this issue explore, machine translation systems—designed predominantly within Anglophone and Eurocentric frameworks—introduce new forms of algorithmic bias. Automated systems tend to prioritise frequency, standardisation, and semantic equivalence, often at the expense of rhetorical nuance and political context. The

[6] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation,' in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (Routledge, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429280641-32.

[7] Moussa Pourya Asl and Syaidatul Asyiqin binti Mohd Hanafiah. 'Mapping Violence against Women in Pakistan: A Galtungian Reading of Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*,' *South Asian Review* 46, no. 3 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2024.2304994.

[8] Ronit Ricci, and Jan van der Putten, eds. *Translation in Asia: Theories, Practices, Histories* (Routledge, 2011), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315760117.

[9] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

[10] Xin Yan Chew and Moussa Pourya Asl, 'The Poetics of Identity Making: Precarity and Agency in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*,' *Journal for Cultural Research* 28, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2023.2291711.

[11] Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (Verso, 2013).

risk is a new iteration of epistemic violence, in which feminist resistance is flattened into neutralised language, and culturally specific idioms of suffering are misrecognised or erased.

Despite a growing body of scholarship on translation and activism,[12] attention to the intersection of gendered trauma, untranslatability, and postcolonial Asian literature remains comparatively limited.[13] Existing studies frequently focus either on translation as a broad political act[14] or on trauma narratives within national literary frameworks.[15] What is needed is an integrative approach that foregrounds how silence, opacity, and linguistic incommensurability function as both aesthetic strategies and political interventions—and how translation mediates, amplifies, or undermines these strategies.

This special issue of *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* responds to this need. By bringing together scholars working across South Asian, East Asian, and diasporic contexts, it examines translation not as a secondary afterthought, but as constitutive of how gendered trauma is produced, circulated, and interpreted. The contributions collectively interrogate several pressing questions: How does translation participate in the silencing or amplification of marginalised voices? When does untranslatability operate as resistance rather than deficiency? What ethical responsibilities do translators, publishers, and digital platforms bear in mediating trauma narratives? And how might feminist and decolonial translation practices reconfigure the global literary field?

At a historical moment marked by renewed feminist movements across Asia—from anti-caste mobilisations in India to #MeToo campaigns in South Korea and China[16]—the global appetite for narratives of gendered suffering has intensified.[17] Yet this appetite often coexists with reductive frameworks that commodify trauma while neglecting its structural roots.[18] By centring translation as a site of contestation, this special issue seeks to complicate celebratory narratives of global circulation and instead foreground the uneven terrains across which gendered trauma travels. The essays gathered here offer theoretically rigorous and empirically grounded analyses that span literary, theatrical, autobiographical, and digital

[12] Maria Tymoczko, *Translation, Resistance, Activism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).

[13] Ruvani Ranasinha, 'Writing and Reading Sri Lanka: Shifting Politics of Cultural Translation, Consumption, and the Implied Reader.' *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48, no. 1 (2013), https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412470951; Moussa Pourya Asl, '"Maidan Sabz Was a Desolate Place": Spatial Politics and the Cartographies of Loss in Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed (2013)*,' *GeoJournal* 91, no. 33 (2026), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-026-11584-w.

[14] Theo Hermans, *Metatranslation: Essays on Translation and Translation Studies* (Routledge, 2023), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003011033.

[15] Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, eds, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies,* 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2019), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315678627.

[16] Jieun Kiaer, Jennifer Guest, and Xiaofan Amy Li eds, *Translation and Literature in East Asia: Between Visibility and Invisibility* (Routledge, 2019), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351108676.

[17] Moussa Pourya Asl and Behzad Pourgharib, 'Precarity and Estrangement: Rethinking Loneliness through Women's Diasporic Narratives,' *Women's Studies* 54, no. 8 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2025.2519097.

[18] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Routledge, 2017), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203360064

domains. Each contribution illuminates a distinct facet of how translation mediates silence, trauma, and resistance in postcolonial Asian contexts.

Sudesh Manger and Deepjoy Katuwal's 'Caste Silencing and the Savarna Gaze: Dalit Muslim Women and the Politics of Translating Sajjad Zaheer's *Dulārī*' interrogates the translational erasure of intra-Muslim caste hierarchies. Through a comparative analysis of Urdu, Hindi, and English versions of Sajjad Zaheer's short story, the authors identify what they term a 'Savarna translational gaze.' Drawing on Niranjana and Dalit critic Yogesh Maitreya, they demonstrate how caste markers such as *lauṇḍi* and *jhootha* are euphemised or omitted, recoding structural oppression as generic poverty. By exposing how translation can reinforce the secular myth of Muslim castelessness, the article advances a Pasmanda feminist translation praxis grounded in reflexivity and anti-caste ethics.

Puja Raj's 'Epistemic Violence 2.0: The Algorithmic Censorship of Asian Feminist Narratives in Translation' extends the critique of epistemic violence into the digital sphere. Examining machine translations of Hindi and Persian feminist texts, the article reveals systematic distortions—mistranslated gendered pronouns, softened political metaphors, and depoliticised rhetoric—that reframe radical critique as apolitical discourse. By conceptualising 'machine coloniality,' Raj highlights how algorithmic infrastructures reproduce global hierarchies, urging scholars to reconceptualise translation ethics in the age of artificial intelligence.

Shashi Kumar G. K.'s 'Translating Historical Trauma and Systemic Oppression: Dalit Women's Narratives through Autobiographies' foregrounds the testimonial and resistant functions of Dalit women's life writing. Engaging texts such as Bama's *Karukku* and Baby Kamble's *Prison We Broke*, the article examines how translation enables broader circulation while simultaneously transforming narrative voice and political address. Kumar argues that translation operates as both a vehicle of visibility and a site of ideological negotiation, shaping how caste-based trauma is interpreted within feminist and subaltern discourses.

Yidan Hu's 'Translating Peking Opera for the Screen: Gender and the Didactic Politics of Legibility' shifts attention to performance and mediatisation. Analysing the subtitled broadcast of *Female Generals of the Yang Family* by the China National Peking Opera Company, Hu demonstrates how subtitles prescribe spectatorship and recalibrate gendered meaning. The transformation of collective martial solidarity into individualised moral virtue exemplifies how legibility can reorient ideological emphasis, revealing the didactic politics embedded in theatrical translation.

Biraj Biswas and Bidisha Pal's 'Translating and Resisting the (In)visible: Trauma and Silence in Manju Bala's Select Short Stories' examines translations of Bengali Dalit writer Manju Bala. Through close textual analysis, the authors show how translation constructs a 'third space' of negotiation, sometimes amplifying counter-feminist voices, at other times diluting socio-political specificity. Their study underscores the tension between global recognition and local rootedness in the translation of subaltern women's narratives.

Nandini Gayen's 'Vernacular Voids: Gendered Trauma and the Politics of Untranslatability in Kallol's Radical Short Stories from Colonial Bengal' turns to the untranslated works of women associated with the Kallol movement. By staging untranslatability as epistemic resistance, Gayen argues that vernacular metaphors such as *ghorer chaya* and *shunya* exceed western feminist paradigms. The refusal of translation becomes itself a political act, safeguarding intersectional critique from assimilation.

Ajeesh A. K.'s 'Untranslatable Ecologies: Rethinking Ecotranslation from Postcolonial Margins' broadens the thematic frame by linking gendered trauma to environmental

precarity. Proposing the concept of (E)co-translation, the article critiques extractive models of linguistic equivalence that mirror colonial resource exploitation. Drawing on Édouard Glissant's right to opacity and Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence, Ajeesh articulates a decolonial praxis that embraces friction and hybridity as ethical necessities. Therefore, despite its limited engagement with gender and sexuality, the paper is included because it extends the special issue's central concerns with untranslatability, epistemic violence, and postcolonial asymmetries into the domain of ecological crisis. By examining how translation mediates environmental knowledge through extractive global infrastructures, the essay deepens the issue's broader interrogation of power, opacity, and ethical representation within marginalised contexts.

Ashita Thakur's 'The Mundaneness of Oppression: Translation, Silence, and Reception in *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*' analyses the global reception of Cho Nam-joo's bestselling novel. Through feminist translation and reception theory, Thakur explores how the novel's sparse, bureaucratic style—often misread as bland—constitutes a strategic refusal of melodrama. The article interrogates how English translation negotiates structural irony and cultural idiom, and how global marketing reframes mundane oppression within universalist narratives.

Finally, Ranran Zhang's 'Untranslatability in Chinese Women's Trauma Narrative: Reading Yan Geling's *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* and Its English Translation' examines how commercial imperatives reshape trauma representation. Zhang demonstrates how the removal of the novel's intergenerational narrator and the amplification of a western priest figure produce a neo-Orientalist 'white saviour' narrative. By analysing deletion, domestication, and adaptation, the article reveals how translation can transform ethical witnessing into consumable spectacle.

Together, these contributions illuminate translation as a terrain of struggle in which silence, trauma, and gendered resistance are continually reconfigured. They show that untranslatability is not merely a problem to be solved but a critical resource—a reminder of the limits of equivalence and the necessity of ethical engagement. By foregrounding postcolonial Asian literatures and the diverse modalities through which they travel, this special issue advances an interdisciplinary conversation that is both theoretically ambitious and politically urgent. In centring translation as constitutive rather than auxiliary, *Translating Silence* seeks to reorient debates within gender studies, postcolonial theory, and translation studies. It calls for practices that honour opacity, attend to intersectionality, and resist the commodification of suffering. At stake is not only how texts move across languages, but how gendered histories of violence and resistance are remembered, contested, and transformed in a global literary order still marked by profound inequality.

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