

Domestication Strategy in Translating *Please Look after Mom* for English-speaking Readers

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Translating, generally speaking, is a cultural interaction of one language/country with another. In the process of shifting a text, different elements are changed to produce a similarity in the target culture in the form of fluency or domestication. On the other hand, literalism or foreignization has emerged as an ethical strategy of translation in order to address problems coming out of changing the source text. In this context, the study reported in this paper will examine specific domestication strategies and the impacts in peripheral literature when a culturally or linguistically minority source language is translated into a powerful and dominant target language. The Korean novel *Please Look after Mom* is employed for an example, which was a million seller in South Korea and was introduced in English in 2011 and also gained an enormous popularity among English-speaking readers.

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1. Introduction

Translation involves the cultural interaction of one nation with another, where dominant cultures exercise their power over other ones. In the process of a text transfer, heterogeneous elements are excluded or reduced to produce a homogeneous melting pot. Foreign cultural elements are melted together into harmonious ones which are acceptable to the dominant cultures in the form of fluency or domestication. In the light, Venuti (1995) points out the fluency or domesticating strategy has prevailed over other translation strategies in translating foreign literatures into English from the seventeenth century to the present day. He continues to say that the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with value, beliefs and representations that preexist it in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality and translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target language reader. Hatim and Munday (2004) also state that within the Anglo-American translation tradition, careful selection has ensured that only the texts which allow themselves to a fluency strategy are included while other texts that resist such a strategy are all completely excluded.

Literalism or foreignization has appeared as an ethical strategy so as to deal with above problems in translation history. Benjamin (2004[1923]) argues literalness allows the pure language to reflect the original text all the more fully, and Steiner (1998[1975]) states literal translation as the most difficult but most desirable form of translation because it embodies the totality of understanding and reproduction of the source text. On top of it,

according to Simon (2012), literalism means a desire to resist interventions and to avoid imposing extraneous decoding, manifesting a kind of polite refusal to control the other text. Cronin (2009) also asserts that advocating a foreignizing, refractory or abusive approach to translation can be seen as a subversive, progressive practice that undermines the homogenizing claims of the dominant language and cultures. Furthermore, proposing the foreignizing and minoritizing translation method, Venuti (1996) speaks:

To shake the regime of English, a translator must be strategic in selecting foreign texts and in developing discourses to translate them. Foreign texts can be chosen to redress patterns of unequal cultural exchange and to restore foreign literature excluded by the standard dialect, by literary canons, or by ethnic stereotypes in the United States. (p. 93)

However, the advocacy of literalism as an ethical strategy for others is mainly based on Western perspectives where the target language is culturally or linguistically dominant, with the foreignizing strategy having rarely been discussed in peripheral contexts that the target language is in a culturally minority position. As a matter of fact, the voice of minority languages or cultures has seldom been heard in translation studies, as Cronin (2009) indicates that translation theory anthologies rarely included contributions from minority language point of view and little or no allowance was made for the fact that attitudes toward translation might significantly change depending on whether the source or target language was in a majority or minority position.

Therefore, foreignization might not be an ethical strategy but could result in violence in peripheral contexts, and if a domesticating strategy is adopted in the case of translating from a culturally dominant source language to a minority-status target language, it can help to protect the latter against a prevailing tendency for it to absorb and thus be undermined by source language textual practice (Hatim & Mason, 1997, pp. 145-146). Indeed, from a perspective of a supporter of a more universalist view of world literature, foreignness can be overdone, not only in producing potentially unreadable texts but also by creating a separatist mode of translation that undermines the reader's sense of connection to a common human experience (Damrosch, 2012[2003], p. 427).

In this regard, the study reported in this paper is going to explore the specific domestication strategies and the effects in peripheral literature when translating from a culturally or linguistically minority-status source language to a dominant target language, making use of the example of Korean novel *Please Look after Mom*, a million seller in South Korea, which was translated into English in 2011 and won huge popularity among English-speaking readers.

2. Globalization of Korean Literature and *Please Look after Mom*

The wave of globalization throughout the world has had an extensive influence on Korean society since the 1990s, and has served to stress the significance of globalizing Korean literature, which remains culturally, literarily and linguistically in a peripheral position in the world literature. So, in 1996, the Literature Translation Institute of Korea was founded by the Korean government with the aim of supporting the translation and publication of Korean literature, thereby promoting Korean literature abroad, but Korean literature is still unknown and unfamiliar to world readers. Related to the causes of such failure, poor translation has been always a focus of criticism among Korean scholars. More specifically, Yun (2012) points out the need for more flexible approaches to translation in order for Korean literature to enter the global market, suggesting that norms should encompass influential factors such as a literary polysystem, translational tradition, readership, ideology of target cultures, power relationships, economic factors, familiarity with the source culture and so on.

Accordingly, the recent success of the Korean novel *Please Look after Mom* in the world market made huge ripples in the Korean literary world. The novel is written by Kyung-sook Shin, one of the most read writers in Korea and the winner of many Korean literary prizes as well as France's Prix de l'Inaperçu in 2009. It's a story of a mother and of her family who search for her after she goes missing in a crowded Seoul subway station. Told through the four voices of her daughter, her eldest son, her husband, and finally, herself, the story shows us a portrait of a woman whose entire identity, despite her secret desires, is tied up in her children.

Originally serialized in a literary magazine, *Please Look after Mom* became a bestseller in Korea when it was published in book form in 2008. It was translated by Chi-young Kim to be published in English by Knopf in 2011 and has won critical acclaim internationally. It won the 2011 Man Asian Literary Prize and is popular in the review section of Amazon. Professor David Parker of Hong Kong University, chair of the board of directors of the Man Asian Literary Prize, said "*Please Look after Mom* is a deeply moving, humane and intricately wrought book, at once culturally specific and universal".¹

The media in Korea have been scrambling to cover the success story and have attributed the success of the novel in the Anglo-American market to active publicity, the reputation of the publisher of the English translation, the universal story of human life and the excellent translation. As for the successful translation, fluency has been the focus of attention in those media. The review section of Amazon shows that fluency strategy was actually adopted in translating the novel:

The translator, Chi-young Kim did an excellent job with the translation and made it seem as though it were originally written in English.²

Chi-young Kim herself also didn't hesitate to say that "the most important element to consider in translating Korean literature is to make it read as if it were originally written in English while maintaining the atmosphere of the source text and the writer's sensitivity".³

3. Domesticating Strategies and their effects in *Please Look after Mom*

The English translation of *Please Look after Mom* displays the popular aesthetic image to conform to the expectations of American readers who prefer to read foreign texts which are almost read like English texts. The process in translation required to meet those expectations can, most of all, be witnessed in the cover page of the novel. When you pick up the Korean version of the novel, you encounter a portrait of a typical traditional Korean mother who silently prays for her family's health, safety, happiness and growth while devoting her whole life and sacrificing herself so that her children may pursue and realize their dreams. The English translation cover page in the Vintage paperback edition, on the other hand, shows a more striking picture of a daughter. The translator and/or publisher may have thought that the more striking image would appeal more to modern American readers. With this alteration, the focus of the story changes from mother to daughter on the cover page.

This kind of change in the woman's image, from the transparent image of a traditional Korean mother to the striking one of a more modern mother, also occurs in the text translation. The family of So-nyo (the missing mother's name) search for a picture to be inserted in a flyer and find a recent family photo. So-nyo in the photo,

¹ <http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=99639>

² http://www.amazon.com/Please-Look-After-VintageContemporaries/dp/0307739511/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1398016241&sr=8-1&keywords=please+look+after+mom

³ http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/04/06/2011040600237.html

which was taken to celebrate her husband's seventieth birthday, is described in the original text, if literally translated, as wearing "an aquamarine hanbok (Korean traditional clothes) with her hair done at a beauty salon, putting light red lipstick on her lips" (Shin, 2008, p. 13). The colours she wears symbolize her character, that is, almost invisible, not asserting herself. However, in the English version of the novel, she is described as looking more ostentatious and as "wearing red lipstick" (Shin, 2011[2008], p. 6). Probably this is the image of American old women with which American readers are more familiar.

Now let us examine in more detail the specific fluency strategies and their effects showed in the English translation of *Please Look after Mom* in terms of linguistic, literary and cultural dimension. First of all, from the linguistic level, the target text (TT) is using the translation strategy to minimize the linguistic interference in order to produce the fluent flow of reading. The translation of the phrase "eomma-reulileobeo-rin" is a good example. The literal meaning is "(the family, children, etc.) who have/has lost mom", with the subject omitted. The source text (ST) represents this cohesive phrase repeatedly throughout the story.

The recurrence of the cohesive device emphasizes on traditional Korean family values. Traditionally, the family is a key element in Korean society. Family members are bound to each other by strong family bonds, joint responsibility and a common destiny. Every family member attributes the fault of one of his/her family members to themselves and feels equally guilty and responsible. Even if it is actually So-nyo's husband who has lost her, all her family members feel responsible and guilty about losing her, and so they regret that they did not go to the Seoul train station to meet their parent and also think they are being severely punished. On the other hand, lexical and structural variations on the phrase of "eomma-reulileobeo-rin" are adopted in the TT from an American perspective:

It's been one week since Mom went missing (Shin, 2011[2008], p. 3)

[...] at Seoul Station, which is where Mom vanished (ibid., p. 8)

[...] when your mom got lost in Seoul Station (ibid., p. 10)

Before you lost sight of your wife on the Seoul Station subway platform (ibid., p. 122)

This lexical variation creates the effect of everyday dialogic style but sacrifices the multiple connotations of the term "lost". The structural variation also shows the efforts made to bridge the cultural gap between Korea and the American world. From the Korean perspective, if a mother is miserable or missing, it becomes the fault of her husband and her children, but this idea is likely to be completely strange to American therapeutic culture.

Secondly, from the perspective of literary convention, there exist two kinds of translation strategies such as thematic and stylistic adjustment in the TT. About the thematic arrangement, melodramatic genre convention of the ST can be said to be reduced in the English translation. That is, there are many melodramatic aspects in the Korean original text, which are mostly represented by descriptions of frequent scenes of tear-shedding or crying. However, the omission of such scenes in the TT shows emotions as more controlled. For instance, in the English text of the Korean text "Father was either away from home or, when he was home, sick. He seemed to be remorseful about that now. He sobbed more violently" (Shin, 2008, p. 266), the last sentence of "He sobbed more violently" is not translated at all. Another example is the last scene of "You are lost in looking at Holy Mother's lips. A teardrop rolled down from your closed eyes. You backed away, staggering, and left that place" (Shin,

2008, p. 282). Its English version is like this:

You stare at the Holy Mother's lips intently. You close your eyes, back away, and leave that place (Shin, 2011[2008], p. 274)

The noticeable stylistic variation in the target text is the re-ordering of a sequence of sentences to divide remembrance and the present situation. The novel is composed of four chapters and an epilogue, and the first three chapters portray the life of the main character, So-nyo, according to the memories recounted in the voices of three members of her family, namely, her eldest daughter, her eldest son and her husband. This remembrance depends on the counter-memory of the characters. However hard they make a try, they can never know or understand So-nyo as a whole. Only when those memories and So-nyo's narrative itself are combined like a puzzle, does So-nyo's complete identity emerge as a mother of self-sacrifice and a human being who has her own desires and dreams. Therefore, the author seems to call the readers' attention to this limit of memory by interrupting remembrance, inserting the current situation narratives, e.g. like "Since you heard about Mom's disappearance, you haven't been able to focus on a single thought, besieged by long-forgotten memories unexpectedly popping up. And the regret that always trailed each memory" (Shin, 2008, p. 17). In the English translation, however, this paragraph is moved to the front of the remembrance section, and the effect that the author tries to convey is weakened in favor of the natural flow of the story.

Finally, in terms of cultural dimension, the translation strategy to enhance fluency or domestication is to decrease cultural strangeness. Cultural terms peculiar to Korea, especially traditional Korea, are omitted or translated into the terms more familiar to the target culture. For example, "agung-i" (Shin, 2008, p. 27), which is a fuel hole to heat a traditional Korean room and also to cook rice, is translated as "furnace" (Shin, 2011[2008], p. 20), and "hobbang" (Shin, 2008, p. 95), a steamed bun with red bean paste filling, is translated as "Chinese bun" (Shin, 2011[2008], p. 88), and "mombbae" (Shin, 2008, p. 227), which refers to loose and fitting working pants for women, is translated as "baggy pants" (Shin, 2011[2008], p. 218). Furthermore, some expressions embedded in Korean culture, such as proverbs, are translated into more neutral ones. The Korean proverb, for instance, would be "I cannot force you to be even a Pyeongyang envoy if you don't like to" (Shin, 2008, p. 227) if literally translated, but it is translated as "I can't force you to let me help you if you don't want me to" (Shin, 2011[2008], p. 219).

4. Concluding Remarks

To sum up briefly here, fluency strategies in *Please Look after Mom* show the process used to achieve the target reader's expectations in terms of linguistic, literary and cultural conventions. This approach could improve readability in the mirror of the target culture, although it leads to reduced differences of foreign texts and cultures, presenting the fact that the identity of the source text has been undermined based on its language, theme, genre conventions and foreignness and on the image of characters.

So, the English translation of *Please Look after Mom* successfully entered the American market by taking a different approach from those used previously, as shown above. Now the success is making a profound impact on Korean literary field. Yun (2012) argues that Korean literature has been actively translated into English and other languages since the 1990s with support from the Korean government to promote Korean literature abroad, but

such efforts have not been successful. One main cause of such failure, according to her, is inadequate translations that the Korean literary circle has been bound by the prescriptive norms of faithfulness and readability in translating Korean literature, which make such translations too restrictive to accommodate the specific needs of various cultures. The translation of the novel, on the other hand, was initiated by a private agency and the publisher of the target text got actively involved in the process of translation. In other words, in this case, the translation was planned to penetrate the American market from the start.

Along with the reflection on Korean conventional translation strategy, the huge success of the English version of *Please Look after Mom* also aroused lots of attention on the translator, Chi-young Kim. Very ironically, unlike the invisibility in the target text and culture, the translator of the novel became visible due to the popularity of the book in the source culture. For instance, in Korea, whenever the English translation of the novel was discussed the translator and her fluent translation were mentioned, and she was interviewed by some Korean newspapers and TV channels about her translation:

Novelist Shin Kyung-sook[’s][...]book would not have made a sensational international debut without professional translator Kim Chi-young.⁴

In conclusion, fluency in translation may be unavoidable or may be effective for the peripheral culture to be accepted in the dominant culture while foreignizing translation which relies on discursive heterogeneity may narrow or even exclude its audience in peripheral contexts, as Cronin (1998) proposes:

Advocacy of non-fluent, refractory, exoticizing strategies, for example, can be seen as a bold act of cultural revolt and epistemological generosity in a major language, but for a minority language, fluent strategies may represent the progressive key to their very survival. Minority languages that are under pressure from powerful major languages can succumb at lexical and syntactic levels so that over time they become mirror-images of the dominant language. (p. 147)

However, we should also always keep in mind Venuti’s (1996) admonitory statement:

Fluent translation may enable a foreign text to engage a mass readership, even a text from an excluded foreign literature, but it simultaneously reinforces the major language and its many other linguistic and cultural exclusions while masking the inscription of domestic values. Fluency in translation is assimilationist, presenting domestic readers a realistic representation inflected with their own codes and ideologies as if it were an immediate encounter with a foreign text and culture. (p. 94)

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⁴ The Korea Times, April 8, 2011 (www.koreatimes.co.kr)

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