

Book reviews

FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND TRANSLATED LITERATURE, ALEXANDRA-MARIA VRÎNCEANU¹

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Abstract

Alexandra-Maria Vrînceanu's *Feminist Ideology and Translated Literature*, published in 2024, enters the relatively less researched field of gender-oriented translation studies, offering a rigorous overview of feminist translation theory and a substantial corpus of case studies. Combining a historical survey of feminism, an overview of translation studies, and detailed analyses of literary works by Muriel Spark, Erica Jong, Hélène Cixous, Margaret Atwood, and Magda Cârneci, the book focuses on the complex interplay between ideology, gender, the agency of the translator, and reception in the target culture. Vrînceanu's volume leans neither towards separating literary and cultural theory from translation and traductology, nor towards subsuming one field under the other, but rather brings them into a mutually reinforcing relationship. In this way, it situates translation practice within established international theoretical frameworks, thus bridging a significant scholarly gap and offering a methodological model for future research by scholars, students, and translators alike.

Keywords: feminist translation; retranslation; translator's agency; ideology; gender bias; translation criticism; comparative literature.

Feminist Ideology and Translated Literature (2024) is a wide-ranging and intellectually ambitious account of how feminist theory intersects with translation. The volume is written against the background of both international debates and the relative scarcity of Romanian contributions to the field. Over the past three decades, feminist translation studies have become a legitimate orientation within the larger field of Translation Studies, most visibly through the Canadian school, which insisted on the translator's voice and ideological agency (Godard, 1990; von Flotow, 1997; Mezei, 1996). By contrast, Romanian scholarship has been slow to pursue such issues. Therefore, Alexandra Maria Vrînceanu's volume fills a gap in Romanian scholarship by bringing feminist translation studies into dialogue with local translation practice.

Cast in these terms, Vrînceanu's volume brings together surveys of feminist literary and cultural theory, discussions of retranslation, as well as detailed case studies based on Western canonical texts and contemporary Romanian writing. The breadth of the analysis rests on the author's triple expertise: she is at once a practicing translator and interpreter with professional experience in both literary and specialized domains, a researcher trained in Translation Studies, and a Junior Lecturer in the English Department at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi. This combination allows her to skillfully handle historical contextualization, theoretical

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argumentation, and close reading. The result is a study that positions itself at the crossroads of Translation Studies, Gender Studies, and literary criticism. Rather than confining itself to a narrow disciplinary framework, it speaks to all three fields and shows how a feminist approach to translation can illuminate the negotiations of power, ideology and gender, which shape literary exchange *sensu lato*.

The book is organized into four main chapters, preceded by an “Introduction” (pp. 9-14) and followed by “Conclusions” (pp. 221-228). The opening chapter, “Feminism in Cultural and Literary Studies” (pp. 15-42), sketches out the theoretical and socio-cultural contexts that underlie feminist thought, tracing a genealogy that stretches across more than two centuries. Such approaches are particularly relevant since representations of femininity are often constructed through conflicting cultural models that position women between social norms and personal identity (Anca, 2015). Vrînceanu begins by discussing texts by Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792) and Olympe de Gouges (*Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*, 1791), before moving to the mid-twentieth-century landmarks: Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; Eng. trans. *The Second Sex*, 1953), Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970). She continues with radical second-wave interventions such as Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970/1972), Sheila Rowbotham’s *The Double Vision of Feminist Theory* (1985), and Susan Lydon’s provocative essay, *The Politics of Orgasm* (1970). Through the analysis of these texts, the chapter problematizes feminist criticism and examines the variety of discursive strategies through which questions of gender, sexuality, and representation have been articulated over time. It explores the ways in which women have been perceived in the both the domestic and the public spheres and places under scrutiny female sexuality, bodily autonomy, and intellectual agency. These concerns resonate with Julia Kristeva’s argument in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) that the focus should not be on questions of primacy but rather on “the instability of the symbolic function in its most significant aspect – the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo)” (Vrînceanu, 14).

Elsewhere in the second chapter, more recent voices – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*We Should All Be Feminists*, 2014), Florence Given (*Women Don’t Owe You Pretty*, 2020), and Natasha Walter (*Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, 2011) – are discussed alongside French theorists such as Hélène Cixous (*Le Rire de la Méduse*, 1975) and Canadian pioneers such as Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, 1972). The Romanian context is represented by Maria Flechtenmacher’s 1879 article, “Cestiunea femeilor” [The women’s issue], Sofia Nădejde’s 1881-82 article in *Contemporanul* magazine, “Răspuns d-lui Maiorescu în chestia creierului la femei” [Reply to Mr. Maiorescu in the matter of the women’s brain], written in response to Maiorescu’s “Creierul femeilor” [The women’s brain] (1879), and Maria Buțureanu’s essay, “Scopul Asociației” [The purpose of association], published in the *Quarterly Bulletin of the Association for the Civil and Political Emancipation of Romanian Women* of January 1919-1920. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the concept of “male gaze” in literature and the shifting tropes of female representation.

Chapter 2, “Feminism and Gender-related Issues in Translation Studies” (pp. 43-64), moves into Translation Studies, contextualizing feminist approaches since the 1990s and highlighting the Canadian pioneers Barbara Godard, Luise von Flotow, Gail Scott, and Kathy Mezei, whose ideas on translators’ visibility and ideological agency underpin the framework of the book. The book’s emphasis on the active involvement of the translator corresponds to the idea that translation inevitably requires interpretive decisions shaped by linguistic and cultural awareness (Feher, 2024). The chapter also references Lawrence Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility* (1995 / 2008) and Henri Meschonnic’s notion of faithfulness (*Ethics and Politics of Translating*, 2007), productively contrasting these with considerations of the

translators' dependence on – or, at the other end of the continuum, autonomy from – authorial choices, while outlining feminist translation strategies and their cultural implications.

Chapter 3, “Feminist Works in (Re)translation” (pp. 65-78), constitutes the methodological backbone of the book. Here, the author adopts and adapts Antoine Berman's three-step approach to translation criticism (*Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne*, 1995; Eng. trans. *Toward a Translation Criticism*, 2009), drawing as well on classifications proposed by Andrew Chesterman (*Memes of Translation*, 1997 / 2016) and by Vinay and Darbelnet (*Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, 1958) [Comparative stylistics of French and English]. Berman's stages – reading and re-reading the translation, reading the source text, and setting off in “search of the translator” – provide the structural framework for the analysis. However, Vrînceanu does not follow this model mechanically; instead, she adapts it to foreground feminist ideology and imagery, examining how such perspectives may shape translational choices when confronting sexist or misogynistic discourse.

Given that Vrînceanu's work is heavily rooted in Translation Studies, the selected excerpts are systematically deconstructed through detailed reference to Chesterman's translation strategies, which serve to reveal preferences, conscious or subconscious biases, as well as occasional misunderstandings on the part of the translators. A further innovative aspect of the methodology is the integration of culture-specific items (CSIs) and the strategies used to render them, as theorized by Javier Franco Aixelá (1996). The analysis also takes into account the status of each translation (that is, whether it is a first translation, a retranslation, a revised edition, or a reprint). Throughout detailed case studies, the author demonstrates that such distinctions, together with paratextual elements including blurbs, cover design, and visual presentation, have a significant bearing on the translation process, on the subliminal messages conveyed to the target readers, and on the overall reception of the text. This section therefore clarifies the differences between *reprint*, *revision*, and *rettranslation*, situating them within larger debates on norms, constraints, and reception.

Finally, after the more pronounced theoretical sections, the substantial Chapter 4, “Case Studies” (pp. 79-220), applies the aforementioned framework to a parallel corpus of five emblematic texts. Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) is examined in its three Romanian versions (*Domnișoara Brodie în floarea vârstei*, 1975; *Cei mai frumoși ani*, 2006; *Domnișoara Brodie în floarea vârstei*, 2007). Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) is traced across its 1996 and 2010/2016 Romanian translations. The discussion of Hélène Cixous's *Le Rire de la Méduse* (1975) is set against its English translation, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), and the more recent Romanian version, *Râsul Medusei* (2021), highlighting the challenges of rendering *écriture féminine* across languages and cultures. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) receives equal attention, being examined through its three Romanian instantiations - *Galaad 2195* (1995), *Povestirea cameristei* (2006), and *Povestea slujitoarei* (2017) - each reflecting a different moment in the novel's reception history and a shifting cultural climate. The final case study, Magda Cârneci's *FEM* (2011), is considered in both its English (2018) and French (2021) versions, a pairing that allows the author to make subtle points about how the gendered perspectives of translators shape the international afterlives of a Romanian feminist novel.

The case studies are, I dare say, where the book's impact should be sought. Vrînceanu consistently resists the temptation to treat translation as a matter of direct equivalence alone. Instead, she captures the very challenge and pleasure of (creative) translation that involves, apart from the rich literary text, paratexts, covers, blurbs, and the reception history of texts. Her discussion of Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), rendered into Romanian as *Cei mai frumoși ani* (2006), is very telling: the case study shows how a single title change can defy theory and complicate ideological implications, cultural recontextualization, and even publishing-market logic. Similarly, her treatment of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973)

demonstrates how feminist sexual discourse can be either muted or amplified depending on translational choices, reminding us that translation inevitably mediates gendered voices. This perspective echoes recent scholarship at the intersection of gender and translation studies, which emphasizes that translation cannot be understood as a neutral transfer of meaning. Since gender, conceived as a culturally produced, power-laden dimension of human identity, shapes how texts are written, interpreted, and rearticulated across languages, translators necessarily engage with gendered positions embedded in both the source text and the target culture. Translation thus functions as a site of mediation where gendered voices are negotiated, reshaped, amplified, or attenuated, depending on cultural norms, ideological frameworks, and the translator's own perspective, bias, and habitus. In this sense, the act of translation both reflects and participates in broader cultural processes through which gender is constructed, contested, and re-signified (Flotow 163-164).

Another dimension that deserves attention is the interdisciplinarity of the project. Drawing on literary theory, feminist philosophy, and sociolinguistics – Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1973) and Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* (1990) are particularly relevant here – Alexandra Maria Vrînceanu demonstrates that Translation Studies can expand productively when placed in dialogue – not juxtaposed or confused – with adjacent disciplines. The inclusion of canonical Western texts and Magda Cârneci's contemporary Romanian novel *FEM* (2011) reinforces this point: Romanian scholarship does not simply import theory; it – without doubt – contributes original material and perspectives to the international stage.

The present volume positions Alexandra Maria Vrînceanu as an important emerging voice in feminist translation studies. The book will be of interest to theoreticians and practicing translators alike. To early-career scholars of translation, it offers a companion to return to as they develop their understanding of comparative analyses of source and target texts, approached with sensitivity to ideology and gender, as well as an understanding of the ways in which translation participates in the afterlives of feminist texts. For seasoned translators, it raises awareness of their own agency. Perhaps the greatest merit of *Feminist Ideology and Translated Literature*, however, lies in its insistence on the non-neutrality of translation. Translators are not invisible mediators but cultural agents whose decisions affect how feminist voices are heard – or silenced – across languages. By focusing on the very challenging line between these two, the author contributes to a better understanding of translation as a site of cultural negotiation and feminist intervention.

In light of these findings, the significance of the selected literary works and their contribution to the international development of feminist ideology and discourse is indisputable, as is the role of their translations in offering readers from diverse cultural contexts access to feminist themes, symbolism, experimental forms of language, and ideology-specific concepts. Adopting a comparative perspective, the conclusions of this study synthesize the results of the comparative analyses conducted across five case studies, which fall into two distinct categories. The first comprises three works with English source texts, namely *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1968), *Fear of Flying* (1973), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), together with their translations, retranslations, revisions, and reprints, within which Antoine Berman's 'Retranslation Hypothesis' is also tested and either confirmed or refuted. Moreover, these analyses account for the quantitative presence of explanatory footnotes, a revealing indicator of the translators' stylistic choices, interpretive strategies, and professional competencies and backgrounds.

The second category consists of two explicitly feminist texts: Hélène Cixous' 1975 manifesto, *Le Rire de la Méduse*, examined alongside its English (1976, by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen) and Romanian version (2021, by Magda Cârneci), and Magda Cârneci's novel *FEM* (2014), analyzed through its French (2018, by Florica Courriol) and English (2021, by

Sean Cotter) translations. In both cases, the translators' dual status as academics and translation practitioners (sometimes also as authors in their own right) proves particularly relevant, significantly shaping their translational approaches, interpretive awareness, and sensitivity to feminist themes, intertextual references, and symbolic density.

Moreover, in the case of *FEM*, both translators collaborated directly with the author, a factor that further informs their strategic decisions. A key distinction emerges between translations into English and those into French and Romanian, rooted in differing assumptions about the target readers' degree of cultural familiarity and their ability to grasp the ideological, symbolic, and intertextual references embedded in the source text. Accordingly, the translators tend to adjust their strategies while remaining deeply faithful to the authors' voices. This mediating role is most visible in the use of explanatory footnotes designed to facilitate decoding and comprehension, as well as in Florica Courriol's "Afterword", which serves to present, in a palatable manner, some salient stylistic features of the novel, and reflects on the challenges encountered during the translation process.

The comparative analyses ultimately demonstrate that all translations, revisions, retranslations, and reprints, despite occasional issues of clarity, semantic distortion, or omission, have generated meaningful outcomes within the target cultures, particularly in the Romanian context. Finally, the generally positive reception of these translations, coupled with the recurring need for revision or retranslation, attests to their sustained impact: through the circulation of these texts, feminist ideas have been disseminated across languages and cultures, while readers' preconceived assumptions about the image, status, and aspirations of the modern woman have been questioned and, hopefully, reshaped.

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