

Western theory in non-western, lesser-known literary translation: Perils of Venuti's foreignization in English translations of Sinhala novels

Dissanayake A. U.

This paper aims to examine the suitability of applying translation theories originating from western cultural contexts to translations of literature written in lesser-known non-western languages. It argues, given the vast differences that exist between different languages, theories that evolve from both western and dominant non-western cultures cannot be removed from their cultural contexts and applied to the translations of lesser-known languages. Similarly, in the context of postcolonial discourses, non-western theories from powerful former colonies that focus on resistance, decrying the violence committed on their literature by the European colonizers fail to address issues of lesser-known former colonies whose literary translations did not undergo similar forms of violence. The study examines a specific western theory, namely, Lawrence Venuti's foreignization strategy to determine if translators of literature written in a lesser-known non-western language use this strategy and how effective this strategy is for such translations. The data for the study was collected by analyzing the strategies used in translating culture specific items in three Sinhala novels into English; "Viragaya" by Martin Wickeremasinghe translated as "The Way of the Lotus" by Ashley Halpe, "Charita Tunak" by K. Jayatilake translated as "The Grain and the Chaff" by Ediriweera Sarachchandra and "Hevanalla" by Siri Gunasinghe, translated as "The Shadow" by Hemamali Gunasinghe. Data related to the strategy used by each translator shows the translator of "The Shadow" uses the foreignization strategy; The translator of "The Way of the Lotus" uses the domestication strategy. The translator of "The Grain and the Chaff" uses both strategies approximately equal number of times. Thus, only one translator, the translator of "The Shadow" uses Venuti's strategy in the translation process. However, due to the lesser-known status of the Sinhala culture, the translator is compelled to use excessive amounts of alien words and provide explanations via footnotes. As a result, the translation lacks aesthetic features and fails as a literary translation. Similarly, in using the domestication strategy, "Way of the Lotus" fails in its inability to achieve cultural communication. By using both strategies, "Grain and the Chaff" ensures the translated text preserves the cultural and the aesthetic features of the source text and achieves a comparatively more successful translation. It is this balanced strategy that is more suitable for translations of literature written in lesser-known non-western languages. Venuti's strategy does not account for this balance. These findings indicate theories that evolve from western cultures do not encompass translation processes suitable for literature written in lesser-known non-western languages and signify the need for theories that specifically address lesser-known non-western cultural contexts.

Keyword: Foreignization, Lesser-known languages, Non-western translation theory, Sinhala culture specific items, Venuti, Western translation theory