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

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Abstract

Existing approaches for non-Western literary translations introduced by Western scholars evolve from their own dominant Western cultural contexts. Whether these approaches from dominant Western cultures address the constraints of translating literature written in lesser-known, non-Western languages remains under-examined. The current study aimed to examine the suitability of applying approaches that have evolved from dominant Western cultural contexts to translations of literature from lesser-known, non-western cultures. The study examined the suitability of Venuti's foreignization strategy to the translations of three Sinhala novels; "Viragaya" by Martin Wickramasinghe 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. The findings showed only the translator of "The Shadow" uses Venuti's foreignization strategy. "The Way of the Lotus" uses the domestication strategy and "The Grain and the Chaff" uses both strategies approximately equal number of times. "The Shadow" achieves cultural communication however due to the lesser-known status of the Sinhala culture, the translation lacks aesthetic features. In using the domestication strategy, "Way of the Lotus" preserves aesthetic features but fails to achieve cultural communication. By using both strategies, "Grain and the Chaff" ensures the translated text which communicates the source culture to a great extent while preserving the aesthetic features. The study identified approaches that evolve from Western cultures for non-Western literary translations are not suitable for literature written in lesser-known, non-Western languages.

Keywords: Aesthetic communication, Cultural communication, Domestication, Dominant culture, Literary translation, Sinhala

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Introduction

For many decades, approaches that evolved in the West have dominated the discipline of Translation Studies. These approaches differ based on the language in which the Source Text (ST) is written. When the ST is written in a dominant European language, Western translators often use the foreignization strategy and remain faithful to the original text. When the ST is written in a non-Western language, Western translators use the domestication strategy and change the text to suit Western sensibilities. However, towards the end of the 20th century, Western scholars began to criticize Western approaches to non-Western literary translations. These Western scholars introduced approaches for non-Western translations that emphasized translators of non-Western literature must ensure the unique non-Western cultural identities are preserved when the non-Western literature are translated into Western languages. These Western approaches, however, emerged from the scholar's Western cultural contexts. Whether these approaches that have emerged from dominant Western cultures for translations of literature written in non-Western languages are suitable for translations of literature written in lesser-known, non-Western languages remains an under-researched area of study.

Before venturing further, it is important to clarify the terminology used in the current study; namely, the concepts of Western and non-western, well-known and lesser-known languages as used in Literary Translation Studies. The term non-Western possesses problems when identifying research models in translation studies as it not only encompasses a vast number of languages however it also carries derogatory connotations. On the other hand, it is argued that the term Western is limited only to English and French. As there is no complete agreement among scholars on the use of Western and non-Western terminology, this study will use 'Western' to refer to languages, literature and translation discourses that originated in Europe and spread to the United States while 'non-Western' will denote the literature of Asia, Africa and South America. Similarly, scholars have not yet identified suitable terminology to describe the languages of the smaller nations of the world.

The eleven terms that have been used in linguistic research to refer to the languages that do not hold dominant positions, such as minority languages, indigenous languages, endangered languages and lesser-used languages carry ideological connotations. The current study will, therefore, opt for the term 'lesser-known languages' considering it as the most suitable among the terminology used thus far in linguistics and related disciplines for languages that remain largely unknown in world literature.

The study aims to examine the applicability of translation processes that emerged in the West for non-Western translations to the translation processes of novels written in a lesser-known, non-Western language. The research question of the study is; how suitable is Venuti's foreignization strategy for English translations of Sinhala novels? The study makes a case study analysis of three Sinhala novels and their English translations to determine if the translators have used Venuti's foreignization strategy and the suitability of this strategy for literature written in lesser-known, non-Western languages. The choice of these novels was based on the fact that they are written in a lesser-known, non-Western language that embodied the rituals and customs unique to a lesser-known, non-Western culture.

Although approaches for non-Western translations have also emerged from dominant non-Western countries, the scope of this study is limited to examining the applicability of dominant Western approaches to non-Western lesser-known literary translations.

Petrus Daniels Huetius identifies a translation as “a text written in a well-known language which refers to and represents a text in a language which is not as well known” (Huetius, cited by Lefevere, 1992, p. 1). Bassnett and Trivedi argue, although Western translators of the past took on themselves the altruistic role identified by Huetius and introduced Western translations of non-Western literature into the canon of world literature, the processes they used resulted in translations that have been suitably domesticated for “European consumption” (Bassnett & Trivedi, 2002, p.5). Dingwaney and Maier contend Western scholars used the domestication approach in their translations “when the culture been translated is constituted as that of the “other”” (Dingwaney & Maier, 1995, p.4). Towards the end of the 20th century, Western and non-Western academics have attempted to defamiliarize non-Western translations by introducing a set of different approaches for translations of literature written in non-Western languages (Saxena & Borin, 2006; Branchadell, & West 2005).

One Western scholar who has championed the preservation of non-Western cultures in Western translations is Lawrence Venuti. Venuti (1995) has translated a large number of works from Italian and French into English and is therefore an active translation practitioner in the West, covering a wide array of fields. Venuti proclaims when translating a Foreign Literary Source Text into a dominant Western culture, translators rely on a free translation. Venuti points out that the reason for this is the ‘transparency’ principle that dominates Western culture, where only translations that have been created using the domestication strategy, thereby, achieving an aesthetic communication are accepted as successful translations. Criticizing the patronizing attitude of the first-world translators towards third-world authors, in his book “The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation,” (1995) Venuti champions the preservation of the sanctity and integrity of non-Western texts translated into dominant Western languages.

Accordingly, Venuti advises translators to use the foreignization strategy to achieve cultural communication. He observes that employing this method makes the translator visible and results in emphasizing the ‘otherness’ of the translation from the point of view of the TT reader. Foreignization in literary translation, argues Venuti, is important for non-Western cultures rich in literary traditions.

Maria Tymoczko (2014), however, argues Venuti’s foreignization strategy emerged from his cultural context in the United States. Tymoczko criticizes Venuti for introducing a strategy for translators of non-Western cultures based on his perspectives within a specific dominant Western cultural context that has a set of different cultural realities from those of non-Western cultures. Tymoczko emphasizes the need to empower the discipline of Translation Studies beyond Western conceptualizations. According to Tymoczko, strategies that evolved in the West that are believed to “act as correctives to cultural enclosure and cultural imperialism” (p. 190) hitherto imposed by the West on non-western cultures, continue to reveal “Western views of translation processes” (p. 191) and may not apply to non-Western translations. Whether Tymoczko’s argument is true within the context of literature written in lesser-known, non-Western languages translated into a Western language, it remains under-researched.

Materials and Method

The study used the qualitative approach and the case study method. The materials used in the study were “Viragaya” by Martin Wickramasinghe (1956) translated as “The Way of the Lotus” by Ashley Halpe (1985), “Charita Tunak” by K. Jayatilake (1963) translated as “The Grain and the Chaff” by Ediriweera Sarachchandra (1993) and “Hevanalla” by Siri Gunasinghe (1960), translated as “The Shadow” by Hemamali Gunasinghe (2010).

A content analysis was made of the Sinhala source texts to identify the Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) in each text. The translated units of these CSIs are then examined to determine the translation procedure used by the translator. Procedures defined by scholars of Translation Studies (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995; Newmark, 1988) are categorized as belonging to either the foreignization or domestication strategy. Procedures that belong to the foreignization strategy are borrowing, calque, paraphrase and notes. The procedures of the domestication strategy are modulation, equivalence and adaptation. After identifying the number of times a procedure belonging to each strategy has been used in the translation the total number of CSIs translated using each strategy is calculated.

Results

The following results were found regarding the translation processes and strategies used by each translator when translating Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) in each Sinhala text into English.

“Grain and the Chaff”

When translating the 252 CSIs in “Charita Tunak”, the translator has used all seven procedures. The procedure he has used the highest number of times is Equivalence, amounting to 28% of the total CSIs. The next procedure that has the highest number of frequency is Borrowing, amounting to 17%. The next highest used procedure is Calque which was 17%, followed by Paraphrase, which was 16%, Modulation 13% and Adaptation 10%. The least used procedure is Notes which was only 07 times, amounting to 03%.

Random examples of CSIs in “Charita Tunak” and the procedures and strategies used by the translator are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Procedures and strategies in “Grain and the Chaff”

Source Text Charita Tunak	Target Text The Grain and the Chaff	Procedure	Venuti's Strategy
<i>hat davase da:ne</i> (p.89)	Seven-days alms-giving (p.72)	Calque	Foreignization
<i>mataka vastra pu:ja: kalemu</i> (p. 85)	offering robes to the monks in memory of the dead (p.68)	Paraphrase	Foreignization
<i>Amma nam me :da :nayata etaram kamati nata</i> (p. 40)	Mother however did not approve of this generosity (p.26)	Adaptation	Domestication

Source Text Charita Tunak	Target Text The Grain and the Chaff	Procedure	Venuti's Strategy
<i>pama:dam</i> <i>appama:de:na</i> (p.164)	<i>pama:dam</i> <i>appama:de:na</i> ...(Footnote: When the wise man drives away sloth with a tenuous effort... (p.144)	Borrowing+ Note	Foreignization
<i>katta:wa: (p.43)</i>	dried fish (p.30)	Modulation	Domestication

The total number of times each strategy is used indicates the translator has used the foreignization strategy 51% and the domestication strategy 49%.

“Way of the Lotus”

The translator of “Viragaya” uses the procedures of Borrowing, Calque, Paraphrase, Modulation, Equivalence and Adaptation to translate the 136 CSIs in “Viragaya” to English. Of these six procedures the procedure that is used most frequently is Equivalence which is used to translate 38% of the CSIs. Adaptation is 20% and Modulation, 12%. Borrowing is 10%, Claque 14% and Paraphrase 08%. Notes have not been used in the translation process.

Random examples of CSIs in “Viragaya” and the procedures and strategies used by the translator in the “Way of the Lotus” are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Procedures and strategies in “Way of the Lotus”

Source Text Viragaya	Target Text	Procedure	Venuti's Strategy
<i>upa:saka kama</i> (p.11)	saintliness (p.9)	Adaptation	Domestication
<i>pin denna o:na</i> (p.13)	we should invoke blessings (p.19)	Adaptation	Domestication
<i>kain minisun dedenek sama:na noveti. sitin ovu:hu i:tat vada: asama:na veti</i> (p. 35)	No two people are exactly alike in physique. Souls are even more different from each other (p.28)	Adaptation	Domestication
<i>mantra su:tra</i> (p.117)	spells and incantations (p.96)	Equivalence	Domestication
<i>dehi kapi:ma</i> (p.57)	dehi kapeema (p.47)	Borrowing	Foreignization

The total number of times each strategy is used in the “Way of the Lotus” indicates the translator has used the foreignization strategy 39% and the domestication strategy 71%.

“Hevanalla”

The total number of CSIs identified in “Hevanalla” is 239. The translator of “Hevanalla” uses all seven procedures. The number of times a footnote is used in the “Shadow” amounts to 42% . Borrowing, is 28% and Equivalence is 20%. The translator has used Adaptation to translate 2% of the total number of translated CSIs and modulation 3%.

Random examples of CSIs in “Hevanalla” and the procedures and strategies used by the translator are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Procedures and Strategies in “The Shadow”

Source Text “Hevanalla”	Target Text “The Shadow”	Procedure	Venuti's Strategy
<i>dasa ma:se: ure:kat va:</i> (p.5)	Dasa ma:se ure: kat va: (p.8) (Footnote: Line from Pali verse, adulating mothers, 'having born me in your womb for ten months)	Borrowing + Note	Foreignization
<i>shra:vaka charitaya</i> (p.9)	Shravaka Charitaya (Footnote: Biographies of the great disciples of the Buddha) (p.18)	Borrowing+ Note	Foreignization
<i>po:ya</i> (p. 36)	on <i>poya</i> days (p. 54) Footnote: Full moon days which are holy days of religious observations for Buddhists.	Borrowing + Note	Foreignization
<i>a:ppa va:tiya</i> (p.37)	hopper-edge (p. 56) Footnote: a hopper is a bowl-shaped pancake with a raised, smooth soft centre surrounded by a fine, crisp, lacy wafer-thin edge.	Calque + Note	Foreignization
<i>bambuwa</i> (p. 44)	Oh bananas (p. 65)	Equivalence	Domestication

In the “Shadow” the translator has used the foreignization strategy 75% and the domestication strategy 25%.

Summary of results

The table below presents a summary of the total number of times each translator has used the foreignization strategy and the domestication strategy in their translations.

Table 4: Summary of the strategy strategies used by each translator

TT	Foreignization strategy	Domestication Strategy
Grain and the Chaff	51%	49%
Way of the Lotus	29%	71%
Shadow	75%	25%

The results revealed that “Grain and the Chaff” has used both strategies similarly.. “Way of the Lotus” uses the domestication strategy more than the foreignization strategy while “Shadow” uses excessive amounts of the foreignization strategy.

Discussion

Venuti's strategy of foreignization for translators of non-western languages has been used only by one out of the three selected Sinhala to English translators. This translator is the translator of the "Shadow." The translator of the "Way of the Lotus" uses the strategy Venuti criticizes while the translator of the "Grain and the Chaff" uses a strategy that neither belongs completely to Venuti's foreignization strategy nor the domestication strategy which Venuti criticized.

By using Venuti's foreignization strategy as the main strategy used in the translation, the translator of the "Shadow" has achieved cultural communication, thereby meeting the requirements Venuti identified as essential in non-western translations. However, to communicate 75% of the lesser-known, non-Western ST culture to the TT reader the translator uses a large number of footnotes. These footnotes explain the unique Sinhala culture to the English reader as seen in the translation of 'Poya'. Although 'Poya' can be replaced with 'full moon day' using the domestication strategy, as this phrase will not convey the religious connotations of the word the translator borrows the ST word into the TT and gives the explanation in a footnote. The use of such footnotes is necessary because of the lesser-known status of the Sinhala culture in the international literary arena. By contrast, a translator of literature written in a well-known non-Western language such as Hindi, Chinese or Japanese need not resort to excessive explanations given via footnotes as their culture is relatively well-known to the English reader. For example, CSIs from dominant non-Western cultures such as Brahman, yin and yan, feng shui can be borrowed into the translation without explanations as these words are relatively familiar to English readers. However, this advantage is not available to translators of lesser-known, non-Western cultures. When translators of literature written in lesser-known non-Western cultures attempt to achieve a cultural communication they are forced to explain the meanings of a majority of the CSIs as the English reader is not aware of the meanings of these CSIs.

The excessive use of explanations via footnotes as seen in the "Shadow" obstructs the smooth flow of the text as it continuously draws the attention of the reader to the fact that he/she is reading a translation of a foreign text. This awareness lessens the aesthetic impact the translation makes on the reader's imagination and fails to give aesthetic pleasure to the reader. As a result, even though the "Shadow" makes a cultural communication it fails to make an aesthetic communication. As such, the translation will not be read by ordinary target text readers who intend to read a literary translation for its aesthetic features. Thus, although the translator of the "Shadow" uses Venuti's foreignization strategy and thereby achieves cultural communication, the lack of aesthetic features prevents the translation from gaining a broad readership.

The overall strategy used by the translator of the "Way of the Lotus" is the domestication strategy. The translator has replaced Sinhala CSIs with English equivalents to ensure the reader is not overburdened with excessive amounts of foreign words. This is visible in the translation of such CSIs as "upa:saka kama" translated to English as "saintliness." With that, the translator ensures the reader is in a familiar setting, thereby creating an environment that will provide him/her with an aesthetically pleasing experience.

However, by using this strategy, he fails to make an effective cultural communication and leaves the reader ignorant of the true meaning of the Sinhala word; a lay devotee following the five/eight precepts in Buddhist doctrine. By using the domestication strategy, he fails to convey the details about the lesser-known, non-Western Sinhala culture to the target reader.

The translator of the “Gain and the Chaff” on the other hand, has used both foreignization and domestication strategies approximately an equal number of times. The data reveals when translating CSIs that play a pivotal role in the ST culture such as the customs of the Sinhalese at a funeral; “mataka vastra pu:ja: kalemū” and “hat davase da:ne” translated as “offering robes to the monks in memory of the dead” and “seven-days almsgiving” the translator uses the foreignization strategy. In doing so, the translator ensures the reader is informed about the source text culture thereby making a cultural communication. However, instead of overburdening the reader with an excessive number of unfamiliar cultural words the translator has selected the culturally insignificant CSIs and replaced these CSIs with English equivalents.

These instances are visible in translations such as “katta:wa” translated using a general term, “dried fish” and “Amma nam medanayata etaram kamati nata” translated as “Mother did not like this generosity.” By using the domestication strategy for these CSIs the translator creates a setting that is not excessively unfamiliar to the reader, thereby ensuring the text makes an aesthetic communication. Given the lesser-known status of the Sinhala culture by choosing both the foreignization strategy to translate the culturally significant CSIs and the domestication strategy for culturally insignificant CSIs the translator achieves both cultural and aesthetic communication. However, this strategy is not the strategy Venuti introduces for non-Western translations.

The results thus revealed Tymoczko’s argument regarding the unsuitability of Venuti’s foreignization approach to non-Western translations is true with regard to translations of literature written in lesser-known, non-Western languages.

Conclusion

As translation approaches introduced by Western scholars emerged from dominant Western cultural contexts it is important to understand if these approaches can be applied to translations of literature written in lesser-known, non-Western languages. The analysis of the three English translations of Sinhala novels gives insight into the translation processes used by translators of lesser-known, non-Western languages that encompass cultural features unique to a specific culture. The analysis shows that due to the relatively unknown status of lesser-known non-Western cultures, translators must use both domestication and foreignization strategies in equal amounts to achieve cultural and aesthetic communication.

This approach differs from the existing Western approaches for non-Western translations. Translators of literature written in lesser-known non-Western languages must look beyond approaches that evolved in dominant Western cultural contexts if they are to achieve translations that lead to cultural communication while preserving the aesthetic features of the original literary text. It is such translations of lesser-known, non-Western literature that will succeed in reaching a wider readership.

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