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# When a Man translates a woman's work…Ideology or Misaunderstanding

Abstract*: The aim of this paper is to analyse a translation of a woman's writing into English. The woman writer chosen is not a declared feminist although her work brings up issues related to women and women's situation in society. The main theme of the work is indeed abortion which, in Italy, was made legal in 1978. The work, however, was published in 1975 and it was therefore quite a taboo for the time period. This work was translated by an English male translator and the assumption is that his ideology could have had an impact in his translation choices as a result of his sex. After a brief introduction of the author and the major themes of her work, this paper will focus on some specific elements and will attempt to analyse the ideological-driven shifts in the translated work.*

Key words: *Translation, ideology, feminism, gender, women's writing*

| SOURCE TEXT | | TARGET TEXT | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Author** | Oriana Fallaci | **Translator** | John Shepley |
| **Title** | Lettera a un bambino mai nato | **Title** | Letter to a Child Never Born |
| **Publishing details** | Rizzoli, Milan, Italy, 1975 | **Publishing details** | Arlington Books, London, UK, 1976 |

## Who is Oriana Fallaci?

Oriana Fallaci was born in 1929 in Florence and lived between Florence and New York all her life. Her books have been translated in 31 countries. Despite the fact that Fallaci is one of the best known Italian women writers, she was not particularly popular with Italian critics. She was often defined as 'il caso Fallaci' (the Fallaci case) or 'il fenomeno Fallaci' (the Fallaci phenomenon) by Italian critics who cannot explain how she can be so popular

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despite her lack of literary skills. Famous as an interviewer, a political revolutionary, and an aggressive journalist for more than 40 years, Fallaci used to consider herself a novelist above all else.

*Lettera a un bambino mai nato* was written in 1975, at a time when women were still fighting in order to obtain the right to abortion in Italy. Abortion was made legal on 22nd of May 1978 with Law 194, which also invited women to adhere to some civil obligations on the subject of abortion. Women were declared to be entitled to interrupt their pregnancy in order to allow a conscious and responsible procreation. At the same time, this law did not allow abortion as a method of birth control. Amongst the reasons for which women could be allowed to have an abortion were the following:

- If pregnancy can physically or mentally hurt a woman;
- If a woman's health is not such as to allow her to carry out the pregnancy;
- If financial, social or family reasons which would prevent a woman from bringing up a child;
- Unwanted pregnancy as in the case of rape for instance.

*Lettera a un bambino mai nato* is not merely a story about abortion as might appear at first sight, but it can be classified as feminist writing. Fallaci denied being a feminist writer on many occasions, although her interviews, writings and her frequent dealing with women-related issues seem to clearly contradict her position. She was often accused of being a lesbian, partly because she clearly expressed in her books her desire to break away from traditionally stereotypical social roles. She was widely viewed as a very controversial personality and she seemed to reject gender stereotypical roles of women as mothers and wives. At the same time, she could combine both her refusal of marriage and her belief in monogamous heterosexual love. Fallaci stated on more than one occasion that she did not consider women as a 'special category' and had often explicitly declared not to be interested in writing exclusively about women's conditions. Fallaci is not well accepted by feminist theorists, because she categorically refused to write specifically about women's conditions. However, amongst critics there seems to be a very widespread belief that Fallaci set out to criticise and attack men in her novels, although this is done in a quite indirect way, by using fictional women to deliver her meanings. *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* can be considered a clear example of Fallaci's contradictory position. This novel was written at a particular time in Italian history when abortion was undoubtedly one of the most important and controversial issues for the country and caused Fallaci to be alienated from the feminist movement. Indeed, in this novel, there seems to be a certain desire to remind women that abortion is bad since from the very first moment that a woman gets pregnant, there is automatically another life, another human being inside that woman who does not have to be regarded, in scientific terms, as being simply an embryo.

Although Fallaci had always stated that she was not a feminist, by simply reading this novel some feminist issues can be easily detected, such as:

- Women's independence and refusal to give up their career;
- Negative statements about men's personality and role in society;
- Disbelief in the traditional catholic concept of family;



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- Reference to men's superiority in all fields;
- Women are said to be guilty by nature according to men;
- Concept of reproduction: Women are conceived by men as biological machines for reproduction;
- Strong comparison between the male and the female doctor. The woman doctor is strongly criticised in the novel by her male counterpart since she is only another 'guilty woman';

Fallaci openly declared that she was once a feminist but then she changed her mind because, in her opinion, feminism was no longer something to fight for but rather a fashionable movement which had forgotten its origins. It could be finally concluded that Fallaci's figure is characterised by a mixture of contradictory factors, such as her search for independence, her strong critiques addressed to both feminists and men at the same time, her refusal to write exclusively about women's conditions as well as her rejection of traditional stereotypical gender roles.

## Comparison of ST and TT

In order to better account for possible ideological shifts in the TT, a few analytical tools have been selected, such as grammatical gender, translation of the so-called women's language, omissions, individual lexical choices and, finally, different stress or emphasis.

## Grammatical gender

Grammatical gender plays an important role in the comparative analysis of translations especially when the two languages chosen do not share many common grammatical features. Italian uses gender marking quite extensively, whereas English does not. This is due to the fact that English is characterized by natural gender whereas Italian is characterized by grammatical gender. Some examples can be found in the novel and its translation into English which suggest a certain degree of mediation by the translator. The relevant vocabulary is highlighted in bold for convenience.

**IT p. 62**

Mi ha definito **assassina**. Chiuso dentro il suo camice bianco, non piú medico ma giudice, ha tuonato che vengo meno ai doveri piú fondamentali di madre e di donna e di cittadina.

**EN p. 59**



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He called me a **murderess**. Encased in his white jackets, no longer a doctor but a judge, he thundered that I was failing in the most fundamental duties of a mother, a woman, a citizen.

In this particular example, the translator clearly wanted to stress the gender ending, although this does not seem to be necessary since it is pretty clear from the context that the speaker is a woman. It is also worth noting that the word murderess is not so commonly used nowadays and that the unmarked form 'murderer' is used to refer to either sex.

**IT p. 78**

La collega che mi sta a fianco non sorrida. Sulle sue tesi io risparmio giudizi ma sul suo modo di esercitare la professione medica non risparmio commenti: in quella gabbia dovrebbero starci due donne, non una. Poi ha guardato la **dottoressa** con sprezzante severità.

**EN p. 75**

I ask the colleague sitting to my right not to look so amused. On her arguments I reserve judgement, but on her way of exercising the medical profession I do not reserve comment: in that cage there should be not one woman, but two. He looked at the **woman doctor** with scorn and severity.

In this passage the translator has clearly chosen to stress the feminine gender of the doctor, in spite of the use of 'her' throughout the extract, perhaps to avoid confusion when he uses 'he' at the beginning of the sentence.

**IT p. 85**

Puttana, le dite se ha fatto l'amore con voi. La parola **puttano** non esiste nel dizionario: usarla é un errore di glottologia.

**EN p. 82**

You call her a whore if she's made love to you. **There's no male equivalent** in the dictionary, and to invent one would be an error in semantics.

The word highlighted in bold is a typical example of feminist wordplay, in this case the manipulation of the grammatical gender. Puns and wordplays are typical strategies used by both feminist authors and / or feminist translators to give a stronger effect to their text(s). Puns are sometimes regarded as 'pun-ishment' in much feminist work. They are related to the pain felt by feminist writers in the 1970s who saw women as living in exile in patriarchal language (Levine, 1991:13). 'Punning expresses their pain' (von Flotow, 1997: 21).

Although, puns and wordplays may seem to be very difficult and challenging, this does not mean that it is not possible to translate them. There could be some strategies and techniques which can help the translator, as also acknowledged by Rachel Weissbrod (1996). There could be words, for instance, which are similar in meaning or in sound in the target language. It is worth noting that in the example above that particular Italian word does not exist and therefore the translator should have tried to reproduce its particular effect, may be



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by using the expression 'male whore'. It seems that the effect is lost in the TT and the translator seems to have opted for a softer and, to a certain extent more neutral, effect in his translation. This example can also fit under another category, that of the translation of the so-called 'women's language', which is discussed in the section below.

**Translation of 'women's language'**

The term 'women's language' is extensively used in feminist theory (Von Flotow, 1997:8). It was created out of the necessity to break free from the traditional patriarchal language which had oppressed women for centuries and it is based on the manipulation of this 'male' language. This new form of language allows women to mark their presence in society and finally come to the surface.

> 'Women's language' is characterized by the manipulation of grammatical gender, by a frequent reference to parts of women's body and to their sexuality (very strong language with frequent use of expletives, perhaps as a gesture of women's emancipation), and by a number of different feminist uses of wordplay which pose many problems in terms of their translation into another language and culture (Leonardi. 2007:117).

In this novel there is a frequent use of the Italian word *ventre* and there seems to be no consistency in its translation into English. The translator opts for different terms, such as body, womb, belly and stomach. Although *ventre* may be translated by any of these words which are, to a certain extent, synonyms in Italian *ventre* has a specific meaning when is used in relation to pregnant women.

- **Body**. A person's or animal's **body** is all their physical parts, including or not head, limbs, flesh and organs (Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary, 1987:147).
- **Womb**. A woman's **womb** is the part inside her body where a baby grows before it is born (ibid:1680).
- **Belly**. Your **belly** is the part of your body, especially your stomach, that holds and digests food (ibid.:119).
- **Stomach**. The **stomach** of a person or an animal is an organ inside the body where food is digested before it moves into the intestines (ibid.:1436).

The translator may have opted for different synonyms of the same word for stylistic reasons. However, it is felt that not all of these words can be applied in the particular context in which the word is used in the ST. In the ST the word always refers to a pregnant woman, whereas the translator's choices do not always imply this. The word 'body' for instance



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seems to be too general. The effect produced by his strategy to adopt different synonyms is that the translator seems to dilute the cumulative emphasis of the ST author on the fact that the woman is pregnant. The translator seems to pick the referential meaning and not the emotional one which seems, to a certain extent, essential in this personal fight against emotions and worries about the pregnancy.

**Omissions**

Although this word may be seen in a negative way, in translation this strategy is not always viewed as drastic (Baker 1992). It is indeed perfectly accepted if it does not spoil the message of the source text. It is interesting, however, to look at all those examples in which omitted words in translation distort and harm somehow the original message. In this respect, the passage chosen is a perfect example of this. It is a sort of dialogue between the author and the never born baby. At times, the omissions made by the translator tend to detract from the centrality of this dialogue, compared to its importance in the ST. The following examples are of expressions which have not been translated at all in the TT, despite their function of giving more emphasis to this mother-child dialogue.

**IT p. 7**
**Me ne stavo con gli occhi spalancati nel buio e** d'un tratto, in quel buio, **s'e' acceso un lampo di certezza**: **sí,** c'eri. **Esistevi**. **É stato come sentirsi colpire in petto da una fucilata.**

**English gloss:**

I had my eyes open and wide in the dark and all of a sudden, in the darkness, a flash of certainty kindled: yes, you were there. You existed. It was like being shot in the chest.

**EN p. 1**
All of a sudden, in the darkness, I was sure you were there.

First of all, it can be easily seen that the translator did not really translate exactly all the words in this paragraph. Secondly, he makes use of just one expression … *I was sure you were there* in order to translate a longer sentence *s'e' acceso un lampo di certezza: sí, c'eri. Esistevi.* (a flash of certainty kindled: yes, you were there. You existed). The emphasis in these sentences is very strong and dramatic since the woman has just found out that she is pregnant. The translation lacks this sense of unexpected maternity which is experienced by the woman as a shock. The TT seems less dramatic and detached from that particular moment in which the woman starts talking to her baby.

**IT p. 101**



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**Guarda** (look), s'accende una luce … Si odono voci … Qualcuno corre, grida, si dispera …Ma altrove nascono mille, centomila bambini, e mamme di futuri bambini: la vita non ha bisogno né di te né di me. Tu sei morto. Forse muoio anch'io. Ma non conta. Perché la vita non muore.

**EN p. 99**

A light is on. I hear voices. Someone is running, crying out in despair. But elsewhere a thousand, a hundred thousand children are being born, and mothers of future children: life doesn't need you or me. You're dead. Maybe I'm dying too. But it doesn't matter. Because life doesn't die.

This omission is particularly significant in this final paragraph of the novel. In fact, its role is to emphasise the fact that the woman is still talking to her unborn child despite the fact that the child is no longer inside her womb. The translation in the TT seems to dilute this dramatic dialogue between the mother and her child.

**Individual lexical choices**

The source and target text do not really diverge much from each other in terms of lexical choice, although there are a few examples which could be consciously or unconsciously motivated by the translator's perspective, such as the following:

- Non mi hai tirato ***calci*** (p. 9) / You've sent me no ***answer*** (p.3)

*Calci* means kicks and despite the fact that such an expression means to give or send an answer to the mother, it is worth noting that to say that the baby is kicking the mother's womb is a pretty common expression used to refer to pregnant women. The translator picks the referential meaning but not the emotional one and the result is that his translation tends to dampen the author's emotion.

- Fissandomi negli ***occhi*** (p.30) / Looking me in the ***face*** (p.26)

Occhi means eyes. The translator opted for 'face' although there is clearly a difference between looking someone in the face and looking someone in the eyes. The second expression, indeed, has a stronger effect and is much more direct than the one opted for.



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**Different stress or emphasis**

The translator does not always seem to respect the emphasis of the original text and this could be detected at three different levels:

- Different emphasis through typography and segmentation;
- Emphasis by using capital letters throughout the translation which does not occur in the ST. Examples include:

**IT p. 58**
Se vogliamo restare insieme, **bambino**, dobbiamo scendere a patti.

**EN p. 55**
If we're to stay together, **Child**, we'd better come to terms.

**IT p. 85**
Dovrei sputare anche su lei, signor dottore.

**EN p. 83**
I ought to spit on you too, **Doctor**.

**IT p. 96**
Mi manchi, bambino.

**EN p. 94**
I miss you, **Child**.

**IT p. 98**
Io corro, bambino.

**EN p. 96**
I'm running, **Child**.

- Different division of paragraphs: the translator does not always follow the original division of paragraphs given in the ST and, at times, he puts two paragraphs together.

Being a dialogue between a woman and her baby, emphasis is an essential feature of the novel and the fact of separating paragraphs from each other, following the ST author's choice should be respected since each paragraph represents a new emotion, worry and a new experience of a woman who has to face her pregnancy and its implications everyday in a different context, such as work, family and so on.



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Finally, the translator seems to consciously add some sentences (may be in order to clarify a concept) but in doing so, he seems to reach somehow a conclusion or a sort of judgement. The following examples demonstrate the superfluous nature of the sentences added by the translator in the TT:

**IT p. 20**

Ma allora é successo il peggio perché il medico ha infilato un guanto di gomma e ha pigiato, frugato, pigiato di nuovo, quasi volesse schiacciarti perché non ero sposata.

**EN p. 14**

But the worst was when the doctor put on a rubber glove and angrily stuck his finger inside me. With his finger he pressed, he pried, he pressed again. **Not only was he hurting me, I was afraid** he wanted to crush you because I wasn't married.

**IT p. 97**

E prendo l' appuntamento col medico, gli dico che sono d'accordo, che bisogna strapparti via. E magari chiamo tuo padre, o non importa chi, e stasera vado con lui. Perché io sono viva … cosí viva che non accetto processi, non accetto verdetti, neanche il tuo perdono.

**EN p. 95**

I'll make an appointment with the doctor, I'll tell him I agree, **one of these days** you'll have to be removed. And I might even call your father or somebody, and go to bed with him tonight: I've enough of chastity. **You're dead but** I'm alive. So alive **that I don't regret it,** and I don't accept trials, I don't accept verdicts, nor even your forgiveness.

These examples clearly show a greater degree of mediation by the translator. The sentences which have been added are arguably superfluous and unjustified from a translation point of view. The effect which results from this strategy is that the translator seems to give a more personal interpretation of the event, although it is not really necessary to do so.

## Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this article attempted to show a link between language, gender and ideology. These three issues seem to be bound to each other and, to a certain extent, might exert some influence on each other in the translation process.

This analysis seems to suggest that there is a certain degree of mediation by the translator in the TT and the result of this is that at times he seems to dilute the degree of drama, which is the most important issue in the novel. It seems that the translator looks at the event with a certain degree of personal detachment, and in doing so he manages to pick only the referential meaning but not the emotional one. It should be noted that the translator might have been motivated by stylistic or ethic reasons, but this analysis suggests that there are also



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other factors which seem to have impinged upon his decisions. His translation strategies, indeed, cannot always be justified on the basis of stylistic options. His ideology could be motivated a variety of factors, including his sex. Being a man means that maybe certain strong emotions, which are commonly felt by pregnant women, could not be understood and were, indeed, softened or omitted altogether. Ideological factors are better detected when the translation of feminist wordplay is involved. For instance, the specific pun selected for this analysis has not been reproduced at all by the translator who, the difficulty of translating puns from one culture to another notwithstanding, has not even attempted to include a footnote, a preface or an afterword in order to explain, and to a certain extent justify, his translation.

Although, this brief analysis clearly showed a certain level of mediation by the translator, the sample data analysed is inevitably too restricted to allow firm generalisations. The purpose of this article is to provide a critical empirical treatment of potential patterns relating to the way men translate 'women's texts and language'. It seems sensible to suggest that such an analysis could also be conducted using data from different languages and cultures. This research paper has focused exclusively on Italian and English, but of course comparisons involving other languages might reveal similar or different patterns to those discussed here. It is also evident that a more accurate and detailed analysis of a larger body of data should allow more reliable conclusions to be reached.

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