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Appropriating Foreignization for Culturally Responsive Readers

Seoung Yun LEE (SOAS, University of London)

I. Introduction

Translation is a task that always raises the issue of the translator's autonomy. Translating most fluently in the Target Language (TL) and coming up with a "readable" Target Text (TT), keeping the translator's activity as invisible or transparent as possible are believed to be the aims of the most desired translation methodology (Munday 217). The strategy that Jeremy Munday highlights is known as "domestication," where the translator attempts to stay invisible and desires his work to blend in with the target culture and language. The translation scholar Umberto Eco perceives the translation process differently from Munday. He discusses the idea of "foreignization" by explaining Russian Formalist's notion of "ostrannenija" or "defamiliarisation," which is a way in which "an artist succeeds in persuading his readers to perceive the described object under a different light and to understand it better than before" (Eco 90). Foreignization, unlike domestication, can be a more flexible practice, allowing the translator of his work to be autonomous. Even though literary translation is deeply fraught with complexities, people tend to condemn foreignization. The translator, however, should be allowed more freedom to express the original.

Gwon Jeong-Saeng's *Mongsil Eonni* (2012) (henceforth, *Mongsil*) is one such literary text that calls for a translator's dexterity. Unlike other children's books, the context of *Mongsil* consists of sensitive issues like the Korean War. The Korean War was a civil war, which carries a special meaning to Koreans of North and South. People who were part of the experience reflect on it as a tragedy that resulted in the division of Korea, and it would be a shame if people forget about it. The author intends to retell the war to his readers, and the translation of *Mongsil* can be a valid project to attract readers who wish to learn about the Korean War and Korean culture. Domesticating the Source Text

(ST) for the sake of convenience and fluency, excluding the cultural difference and replacing it with the familiar for the target readers of dominant culture and language can be an act of an imperialist. The reason for the attempt of foreignizing this unfamiliar work is for a gradual reception and expansion of the readership. Blinded with an objective to provide a domestic representation of the foreign text and culture for the privileged readers' readability of the TT, translators of marginal cultures and languages tend to choose domestication over foreignization. Domestication may be the easiest way to increase the readership, but the translation will reach those who wish to learn and who want to care about what the ST author wishes to say. This paper attempts to investigate on the necessities of foreignization when translating *Mongsil* and to modify the stereotype on foreignized literary translation.

II. About the Source Text

Mongsil has a special theme that is unconventional for a children's book. In the novel, the Korean War is perceived through the eyes of a teenaged girl named Mongsil. She is the eyewitness of the war at its raw state. The novel has three phases, which are the pre-war state, Korea at war and after the war. There are long chapters that deal with Mongsil's pain and suffering as she experiences the war. She constantly questions herself and those around her why Koreans are fighting against each other. Her confusion is a trigger for the readers to reflect on the Korean War. The protagonist Mongsil treats people without any prejudice whether they are from the South or the North. By looking into Mongsil's thoughts and experiences, readers can speculate what the war was like and also come to understand that Koreans, whether they are from the North or the South, are the same people. This is the essential message that the author wishes to share with his readers, for this is evident on every page. A war, whether it is for a short period of time or not, is a topic that seems unfit for children due to its inhumane brutality, but the author has successfully described the war by juxtaposing the innocent South Korean child with North Koreans, who seem unsettled and perplexed with the ideas of the division of Korea and fighting against the same people. These soldiers are merely following orders from their superiors, and instances show that they are going through the dilemma of fighting against people who are the same as them. Gwon portrays the hidden and unknown sides of the war by revealing the inner thoughts of

the individuals who take part in the war, reforming the stereotypes that people generally have about North Korean soldiers.

The work, so far, has been translated into Japanese, Spanish and Chinese; hence, translating Gwon's work into English seems to be a meaningful addition to the collection, expanding the global readership. The author has not specified the age group for his intended target readers, but the Korean publisher classified this work as a children's book since Gwon is renowned for his books for children. As for its English translation, the readership is not limited to certain age group. Due to its cultural qualities, it should be accessed by the readers of all ages who are keen on learning about Korean culture or the Korean War. Moreover, since the topic of Gwon's work might attract readers other than those of only with English or American background, this is all the more reason for broadening the age range of the target readership.

The foreignized English translation is bound to contain foreign elements, and readers unfamiliar with Korean culture and used to domestication might view it as a poor rendering of the original. For books heavily loaded with cultural elements, translators tend to choose domestication as a safe choice to stay within the boundary of the target readers' satisfaction. Haidee Kruger, a scholar of children's literature in South Africa, openly criticizes the limitation of such domestication practice. She believes that translators of marginalized cultures who appropriate domestication are overly concerned with assimilation and adherence to the target culture: "Children's books from other/Other places in the world are selected and translated on the basis of providing children in the USA with particular, ideologically acceptable versions of or perspectives on cultural difference, perspectives that function to keep the ideological status quo intact" (116). In this view, translation has often ended up being a one-way process, translating into "European languages for European consumption" instead of playing "its popularly imagined role of facilitating a two-way process of cultural exchange" (116). The translators of such practice do not come under Kruger's harsh criticism, but she warns about "cultural colonization" that these translators might impose by using domestication methodology (116). The main aim of translating Gwon's work into English is not to come up with a target culture-oriented version, but it is to enrich the reading experience for those who wish to learn about the backdrop of the Korean War.

III. Cultural Communication via Foreignization Methodology

Discussion in this paper will focus on foreignization theory and how foreignization methodology is used when translating Gwon's *Mongsil*. Foreignization methodology consists of transliteration and romanization. Usage of transliteration is not an implication that the translator is incapable of finding the equivalent term in the TL for the word in the ST. The method also includes providing an explication of the foreignized word for the readers' understanding of the ST. In *Mongsil*, names of famous figures, places, and political ideologies frequently appear throughout the text, and these words and names carry cultural meanings that the author intends to show in his work. To preserve the ST's foreignness, these terms are retained in the TT and brief explications follow these words for the readers' understanding. Names are also possible candidates for domestication if they seem to be too foreign for the target readers, but replacing them with the TL equivalents or removing them is not the only solution for translating these terms and words. As foreignization is a translational methodology to bring the readers closer to the ST author and the foreign language and culture. Venuti sees foreignization as a "highly desirable [...] strategic cultural intervention," which "send the reader abroad," meaning that the readers of the receiving culture are induced to acknowledge the cultural differences and the foreignness of the original (*The Translator's* 15–16). The predecessor of Venuti in foreignization, Antoine Berman, argues that replacing an idiom or proverb with a TL equivalent is an act of "ethnocentrism" that removes the otherness and the foreign elements of the ST (287). He uses an example found in French translation of Joseph Conrad's work in which the name of the British mental health hospital "Bedlam" has been switched with a similar hospital in France "Charenton" during the translation process (288). He adds that this act would only result in evoking different cultural references, and romanization or transliteration can be the option for preventing such violation. The names of Korean armies, political ideology, and Korean national flags and places are repeatedly used terms in Gwon's text that have been foreignized in the TT, but retention of these words does not hinder the readers' understanding.

Before delving into the details found in the translation, a question should be kept in mind as to which translation methodology is decided upon and applied. Does an expected reading audience determine the right for a translation to exist? Walter Benjamin, in "The Task of the Translator," addresses the issue of the

meaning of the translation's existence. According to Benjamin, artists and poets do not think of the readers when they are writing their works. Since translators are also creators of their translations, Benjamin finds it odd why translators need to be constantly conscious of the readers, explaining every detail to the target readers "who do not understand the original" as their duty (71). He believes that translators whose only concern is to please the target readership will compose translation that only has "a transmitting function [which] cannot transmit anything but information—hence, something inessential" (71). In other words, being conscious of the reactions of the receiving audience, the translator might produce a bad translation that lacks character and cultural color that were evident in the original. This is why the translator should not be restricted to thinking only of coming up with a translation that satisfies the target readers when translating the ST.

Oftentimes, domestication methodology is brought up when foreignization is being discussed. Domestication and foreignization are contrasting strategies, but they are both necessary in translating a literary text. Literature contains ambiguities and various connotations that lead the translator to struggle with creative substitutes for these words. When translating a literary work, translators are heavily influenced by the society, the culture and the period that they belong to. Foreignization and domestication are frequently used strategies during literary translation process, but a translator owns the authority of using these methodologies. Thus, apart from considering the origin of the ST, literary translation is a complex task that shows the limitation of finding the balance between foreignization and domestication.

The task of coming up with a perfect translation is impossible. A translation that is "valid for all times and all places" is a task that many translators attempt to accomplish but fail to do (Bassnett and Lefevere 1). Bassnett and Lefevere introduce Friedrich Schleiermacher's notion of "alienating" to describe how the privileged position of the receiving language and culture can sometimes hinder the understanding of the ST. Examples of alienation found in the translation of *Mongsil* are political and national terminologies that represent the propaganda that the North Korean government supports. The sentence, "왜 인민군은 국군을 죽이고, 국군은 인민군을 죽이는 거예요" (122, *italics mine*) has been translated as "Why does the North Korean People's Army kill the national army, and why does the national army kill the North Korean People's Army?" There are several ways of referring to the North Korean army. Some of the options are the North Korean armed forces, the North Korean army

and the Korean People's Army (KPA) (Cumings *xiii*). Out of many historical text that deals with the Korean War, Richard Peters and Xiaobing Li use the term "North Korean People's Army (NKPA)," to indicate the North Korean army (80). The ST author also refers to the North Korean army as "Inmingun" (인민군) or North Korean People's Army not as "Bukhangun" (북한군) or North Korean army. The word "inmin" (인민) derives from "Inminjui" (인민주의) or "Populism/Communism" that the North Korean regime supports and publicizes among its people. As for the word, "Guggun" (국군), if it were domesticated, then it would be "South Korean Army." If it were domesticated, the target readers would easily distinguish the South Korean Army from the one from the North, but it seems as though the author has intentionally used it to highlight the divided state of Korea, stressing on how there used to be just one national army. Consequently, the word "Guggun" (국군), has been preserved as the "national army" since Mongsil is from the South and she utters the word as it comes to her mind. Schleiermacher states, "alienation" preserves "the alterity of the source text" (Bassnett and Lefevere 8). Lawrence Venuti elaborates further on this notion of "naturalizing" and "alienating" and coins the terms "domestication" and "foreignization," respectively, in his work. The readers might feel the distance when reading words that contain "people" without background knowledge of the North Korean regime or words such as the "national army" without clarifying which country's it belongs to. It should, therefore, be noted that the "alterity" of the state of war is emphasized through this "alienation."

For literary translation, Venuti prioritizes the foreignization strategy over domestication. Domestication minimizes the foreignness of the TT and prioritizes "transparent, fluent, 'invisible' style" for the target readers (Munday 218). Similar to Munday's definition of domestication, Edwin Gentzler describes the process of domestication as "making the foreign familiar, providing readers with the experience of recognizing their own culture in the foreign" (37). However, as a passionate supporter of Venuti's foreignization theory, he defends Venuti's pessimistic perception of the domestication practice: "[A]ccording to Venuti, [domestication is] a kind of a cultural imperialism, one which preserves social hierarchies, maintains political and religious conceptions, and assists in economic commodification and consumption" (37). In this regard, Venuti underscores that "domestication" has the potential of eradicating the marginalized culture or the foreignness of the ST. In the translation, names of national flags from both Koreas are

foreignized. Mongsil is told to put up the national flag because the North Korean Army is approaching the village. To prevent the attack from the North Korean Army, Mongsil hurriedly looks for the flag and tries to put it up. During her search for the flag, she reminisces how she had put it up on the day of Korea's independence from Japan's colonial rule. Instinctively she puts up South Korean flag since it used to be the national flag for Korea before its division. The name of the liberation movement day is "Samiljeol" (삼일절) and foreignizing it seemed necessary to highlight the tragic reality that the nation that once fought for independence has lost its hope as a one country. Thus, symbolic words such as *Taegeukgi*¹ and the Samil Independence Movement Day have been foreignized. The sentence from the ST, "몽실은 기를 끄집어내었다. 그건 지난번 삼일절에 내다 걸었던 빛바랜 태극기였다" (Gwon 108) has been translated as "Mongsil pulled out the flag. It was the faded *Taegeukgi*, which she hung up last March on Samil Independence Movement Day." To enhance the comprehensibility, a brief explication that describes Samil day was added. Therefore, as Venuti claims in his *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, "foreignization" is a "highly desirable" translation strategy and is a "strategic cultural intervention," which allows the readers to experience the marginalized foreignness of the ST language and culture (15–16).

The names of significant places have been foreignized rather than to simply refer to them as mountains or rivers. When the North Korean army starts to occupy the village, the children are forced to learn from schools taught by the North Korean army. They are even taught to sing songs that distinctively show that it is a North Korean song. The sentence "‘장백산 굽이굽이…….’ 아이들은 이런 노래도 배워서 불렀다" (Gwon 126) was translated as "‘The winding valleys of Mt. Jangbaek ...’ Children were taught to sing songs like this." The name of this mountain may seem too alien, but if it were domesticated, then the name would simply be replaced by "mountains." However, if the name is removed, the readers will not be able to detect why such lyric is mentioned in the original text. The fact that South Korean children are being taught at a North Korean institute and forced to memorize songs like this show the war's effect on children's education.

Similar to Mt. Jangbaek, the name of a river that runs through North

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1. On the day of the independence movement, which took place on the 1st of March 1919, Koreans waved the forbidden *Taegeukgi* and protested against Japan in an effort to reclaim their land (Millett 927).
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Korea was foreignized as “Aprok River.” By having these place names italicized, they become more apparent and recognizable in the TT, allowing target readers to acknowledge these words as they are. Mt. Jangbaek and Aprok River are significant places, for both are located in North Korea. The result of the division of Korea is that they now belong to North Korea. The segregation of the country’s natural environment highlights the physical and psychological divide of once unified Korea. If these place names were domesticated or omitted, then the symbolic message that the author wishes to share would also be lost.

In order to practice foreignization, the translator needs to be knowledgeable in the Source Language (SL) as well as the TL. The key feature of foreignization is capturing and preserving the peculiarities of the foreign culture that is conveyed in the original text. In relation to this notion, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also comments on translation practice that plunders cultural elements that the ST author emphasizes in the ST work, and she argues that this should not be encouraged. She also believes that the translator’s “relationship with the language being translated” should be close and that the translator needs to be capable of “speak[ing] in it about intimate things” (372). This literally means that Spivak thinks that the translator is not only linguistically capable of translating the ST but also culturally insightful on subjects that the author talks about in the original text. From Mongsil’s monologue, her loneliness and helplessness can be detected:

Father, where are you? You have left to shoot down the North Korean People’s Army, but the communists still barge into our village, killing our people. Mother, don’t you feel sorry for Nannam? Why did you die? Mom of Daetgol ... Are you still rich? Didn’t the North Korean People’s Army attack your village? Even now I am trembling in fear all by myself, holding onto a baby without a mother or a father. There is nothing to eat. I have run out of rice to make gruel for Nannam. Mom, mom ...

아버지, 어디서 무얼 하세요? 공산군을 쏘아 죽이러 갔는데 공산군은 이렇게 쳐들어와서 사람을 죽이고 있잖아요. 어머니, 난남이가 불쌍하지 않으세요? 왜 죽었어요? 그리고 땃골 엄마, 엄마는 지금도 부자예요? 거긴 공산군이 안 왔어요? 지금 난 이렇게 엄마도 아버지도 없는 아기를 안고 혼자 무섭게 떨고 있어요. 먹을 것도 없어요. 난남이에게 죽을 쑤어 줄 쌀도 떨어졌어요. 엄마, 엄마……. (Gwon 114–15)

Mongsil's sorrow is well portrayed through her monologue and she addresses both her mothers. When she refers to her biological mother she says, "Eomma" (엄마) so it was literally translated as "mom." Also when she calls her stepmother as "Eomeoni" (어머니), this was translated as "mother." Interestingly, in the ST, the mothers' names are combined with the names of their hometown or the place names of their current home. For example, Mongsil's biological mother is called as "Daetgol Eomma" (댁골 엄마) and her stepmother is known as "Eomeoni" (어머니 114) or "Bukchondaek" (북촌댁) (139, 111). Here, "댁골" or "Daetgol" is the place that Mongsil's biological mother moved to when she left Mongsil and her father for a man who lives at "Daetgol." As for the word "Bukchondaek" (북촌댁), it literally means "a woman from Bukchon" (111). However, the direct translation can cause confusion for the target readers so the word "stepmother" has been added for clarification. However, the names of the places have been romanized, maintaining the consistency.

Most of the words that appear in the original text that are symbolic and cultural were retained when translated into English. Since this text has a unique cultural, historical, and social setting, the names of the places and the political leaders were retained. As for the word "Gongsangun" (공산군) that Mongsil uses in her monologue, direct translation of that word would be "communist army" but it seemed unnecessary for North Korean People's Army has been used throughout the text in order to depict the North Korean army. However, omitting the idea of "communists" that is evident in Mongsil's monologue could also be considered as an act of plundering, so it was added in the second sentence as an explication. In similar vein, the word "Gongbi" (공비) (121) is also a cultural and colloquial expression that people often use to refer to North Korean guerrillas. The word "bi" (비) derives from Chinese character which refers to "band of bandits," and with this character, people have combined the word "Gong" (공) from "Gongsandang" (공산당), which means communist. By combining these two words, people have come up with the term "Gongbi" (공비) and the most fitting word that seems to be the equivalent of this term was "communist guerrilla." Hence, as Eco emphasizes, "a translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, *cultural*" (82, italics mine).

Despite the general knowledge that foreignization consists only of romanization or transliteration, as it is a cultural project, it involves other procedures such as "cultural innovation." Venuti asserts that the efforts to foreignize a text are to "promote cultural innovation as well as the understanding

of cultural difference by proliferating [and increasing the options of] the variables within English” instead of reducing the otherness to sameness of the target culture (*The Scandals* 11). As asserted by Venuti and Spivak, bringing up the cultural difference of the ST to the target readers is one of the objectives of using foreignization. In relation to the aforementioned subject of the war’s influence on children’s education, children are also taught to sing songs with lyrics that praise the North Korean leader: “아아 위대한 수령님 김xx 장군 ……” (Gwon 108). To enlighten the readers who the general is that the children are praising, “Ah the great leader, general Kim Il Sung …”, the full name of the North Korean leader was added, and by adding “Kim Il Sung” the target reader will be able to understand how much North Korean political ideologies affected the education system that the children of the South are singing songs to praise the North Korean leader.

Apart from political ideas prevalent throughout the original text, some Korean common nouns were foreignized, taking into account Korean customs and culture. Mongsil, when she meets a North Korean female soldier, asks where she comes from: “저어, 아줌마 어디서 왔어요?” (120). Here, “ajumma” (아줌마) is a common noun, which is “Madam” in the TL. The word “ajumma” (아줌마) is used as a polite and cordial term to address a married or unfamiliar woman. Since the term is used during a conversation, it has been converted as “ma’am,” which is how it is often used in a colloquial way. When the female soldier is addressed as “ma’am,” she wants Mongsil to drop any formalities: “Don’t call me ajumma. Call me eonni” (아줌마라고 하지 말고 언니라고 불러라) (120). She tells Mongsil to call her as “eonni” (언니) which is “older sister” in the TL. The word “eonni” (언니) is often used among women even if they are not biologically related, and it is used among people who are close in relation. Unlike the SL, in the TL, “sister” is rarely uttered in speech and it is only used in a sentence to indicate family relations. However, it could not be omitted for it serves the role of linking Choi Geum-Sun, the female soldier, with Mongsil. A colloquial way of calling “sister” is “Sis,” so it was adopted in the TT. As romanizing is not the only method of foreignization, in this case, words that contain similar sentiments and color have been used as the foreignizing tactic. If these terms were domesticated, both words may be removed since conversation can be exchanged between two people in English without calling out names. However, they have been retained to portray the developing stages of the friendship between Mongsil and the North Korean soldier.

IV. Conclusion

There are constant debates held by the translation academia on selecting the most appropriate translation practice for literary translation. Some argue that domestication is preferable for smooth readability. Others, the supporters of foreignization, condemn the practice of domestication as the act of cultural colonizer. When foreignization is used as main strategy in translation, people show concern over readability or fluency. Venuti is aware of the obstacle of incomprehensibility that foreignization might impose on the target readers, so he emphasizes that the foreignization method should not “impede reading” but “create new conditions of readability” (*The Translator’s* 19). Despite the international success of Venuti’s foreignization theory, in reality, the literary translation circles intentionally “dismissed or ignored” Venuti’s ideas, and it turned out that “practicing translators have a hard time deviating from the traditional strategies and fidelities” (Gentzler 39–40).

Literary translation is a task that undergoes constant changes. It is always open for revisions. Indeed, it is an imperative that the TT turns out as acceptable and readable for the target readers. For smoother readability, domestication may be used, but foreignization is effective when rendering political, national and cultural words and expressions. The terrain of literary translation is immeasurable. Foreignization is an inevitable practice when translating cultural texts like Gwon’s works, but some may still consider domestication as a more essential strategy when translating literary texts. Some of the readers of English might argue that the English translation lacks consistency and fluency due to imbalance of foreignization and domestication strategies. Instead of choosing the easy way out, the practicing literary translator should own the right to be venturesome and be experimental as long as he does not create a TT that is incomprehensible or beyond readable.

Although the setting of *Mongsil* does not belong to the dominant culture and even though it was not written in the dominant language, reconstructing or converting the language and its syntax to suit the taste of the privileged readers of dominant culture is unnecessary. Alienating the target readers from the TT can be seen as absurd practice, but via foreignization, the translator stays faithful to the ST writer and the contents, providing the readers with opportunities to decipher the marginalized culture and language. Hence, translators should be liberated from the burden of coming up with translation that are acceptable to the readers of the receiving culture. The translators who

believe the essence of the ST lies in its otherness should be able to preserve such foreignness; hence, freedom should be given to such translators as long as their translations do not drastically hinder comprehensibility of the target readers. Smooth readability can be a convenience that the target readers might enjoy when reading the TT, but the otherness or the foreignness of the ST can be obliterated due to lack of effort and care. The problematic aspects of the foreignization can therefore be resolved if the translator can disown excessive loyalty towards the target language, culture, and readers. In sum, it is only hoped that this study serves as a useful ground to consider foreignization methodology as one of the first options of literary translation rather than the last choice.

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Abstract

This study explores the possibility of applying foreignization on Gwon Jeong-Saeng's *Mongsil Eonni*. Many scholars of literary translation encourage domestication over foreignization, so there exists insufficient finding on the process of foreignized translation of children's book and the responses of child and adult readers of such translation. Distancing or alienating the target readers from the Source Text (ST) is considered as undesirable by the supporters of domestication. However, despite the widespread notion of domesticating literary texts, Lawrence Venuti offers ways of applying foreignization when translating literary texts of marginalized culture. He argues that alienation is necessary rather than assimilation when reading texts that contain elements of the marginalized culture. Foreign textual elements found in the foreignized text allow the target readers to acknowledge the cultural differences that are easily overlooked when the ST is domesticated. Translation is known to be a medium or tool in exchanging two cultures but the translation fails to play this role when domestication is used. By applying foreignizing translation strategy on *Mongsil*, the translation delivers the message that Gwon wishes to tell his readers. The confusion and sorrow felt by Koreans of the North and the South due to sudden division and war are key sentiments that the ST author emphasizes throughout his work. Hence, by preserving the foreignness of the political, ideological and cultural terms and notions from the ST, the translation enables a bidirectional interaction between the target readers and the unfamiliar.

Keywords: foreignization, domestication, Lawrence Venuti, Gwon Jeong-Saeng, *Mongsil Eonni*

Seoung Yun LEE received her MA in Theory and Practice of Translation from SOAS, (University of London) in 2014. She earned her BA in English Literature and Language from Ewha Womans University. This paper is based on her thesis: "Appropriating Foreignization for Culturally Responsive Readers." Her research interests include Korean literature, foreignization domestication and positionality of the literary translator.

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