

Book Reviews

Translation in African Contexts: Postcolonial Texts, Queer Sexuality, and Cosmopolitan Fluency

By EVAN MAINA MWANGI

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In a world that is increasingly aware, perhaps uneasily so, of multilingualism and multiculturalism, translation as an interlingual and intercultural activity has gained in relevance. Although translation is a practice known to almost all languages and cultures, translation studies as a specific discursive domain is almost exclusively a Western creation. Most of the theories and theorists in the field, therefore, have perceived the issues associated with it from a Western standpoint, focusing on the power imbalance between dominant “monster” languages like English and colonized or marginalized languages that are under threat of being devoured by it. However, Evan Maina Mwangi’s *Translation in African Contexts: Postcolonial Texts, Queer Sexuality, and Cosmopolitan Fluency* offers a non-Eurocentric perspective of the process of translation located in the context of Africa.

Translation and its attendant challenges have also been dealt with and theorized quite extensively in postcolonial multilingual contexts like Africa and Asia, where the native languages are seen as peripheral to a dominant, cosmopolitan language like English. This has resulted either in a postcolonial championing of hybrid or “local” Englishes such as, pidgin, creole, or Hinglish that, as their proponents claim, have appropriated the colonizer’s language; or in a belligerent “native” stand that espouses mother tongues as demonstrated by Ngugi wa Thiong’o through his defiant use of Gikuyu. Mwangi cautiously circumvents this binary and proposes an alternative inclusive model that he terms *cosmopolitan*, where foreignness is accepted and tolerated without an insistence on the foreign becoming native. He explores this concept, along with issues of gender and sexuality, in the practice of translation in the various African languages.

Drawing upon Lawrence Venuti’s notions of fluency and foreignization/domestication, Mwangi argues that domestication is not, as Venuti posits, the exclusive hallmark of Anglocentric translations. He cites from a wide array of African language texts to prove that all translations into native languages are indeed domesticated; through this he also undermines Venuti’s argument that all attempts at foreignization imply resistance to a hegemonic language. Conversely, many “domesticated” translations into English are found to be more resistant than even African language texts.

The issues of translation also lead on to the politics of gender and sexuality, aspects that are often influenced by the translator’s predilections toward these issues. Mwangi

demonstrates how sexuality, especially queer sexuality, gets repressed through African language translations; one such example being the Shakespeare translations done by the former Tanzanian prime minister Julius Nyerere. Through a meticulous analysis, Mwangi demonstrates how these aspects, however, seem to surface like the return of the repressed—in other words, the Freudian “treachery” of translation.

It is not just theoretical knowledge that enriches Mwangi’s observations of African language texts and translations but the practical experience of teaching African literature in both Kenya and the United States of America. This experience of academia, Western in location or orientation, has made him aware of an inverse form of Orientalism that assumes literature written in the languages of the global south are “resistant” and true to their ethnic cultural identity. Such romanticizing is not confined to those in the metropolitan centers of knowledge production but extends to native writers like Ngugi who argue for the use of a native tongue such as Gikuyu. The refreshing aspect of the book is this unpartisan approach that refuses to valorize or denigrate native cultures, a *post-Afrocentric* (the term used by Mwangi) stance that views the issues dispassionately.

Thus this book is an innovative attempt to locate the activity of translation at the intersection of cosmopolitanism and gender; the analysis is detailed and comprehensive. It draws upon the major translation theorists such as Lawrence Venuti and Gideon Toury, among others. It also brings an impressive array of African language texts to the forefront. *Translation in African Context* thus makes a meaningful contribution to the domain of translation studies through a rich combination of meticulous research, innovative use of theory, and empirical observation.

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Edinburgh Companion to the Postcolonial Middle East

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Although it is true that students and scholars of the Middle East can find many first-rate monographs on their subject, a compendium has historically been lacking. The answer to this absence is Anna Ball and Karim Mattar’s *Companion*; and upon it the highest praise should be conferred. Expertly edited and inspiringly ambitious, their book furnishes the reader with a near inexhaustible set of critical tools with which to approach this rich and complex subject. The word *companion*, in this instance, could not be more appropriately assigned.

The book’s introduction usefully parses the relevant histories of the field before opening with several chapters that set the tone for the text as a whole, partly by addressing tensions that arise from its pioneering scope. Karim Mattar returns to Edward Said’s ambivalence toward postcolonialism; Wail S. Hassan makes predictions