

Pinar Kür¹ as a Bold Female Translator: Translating Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* for a Turkish Audience

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Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir declares that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" and this process incorporates an acculturation where the woman acquires a specific perspective that separates her way of thinking from that of the men in her culture. This specific perspective that is attained by the woman will manifest itself even when that woman translates a text written by a male author. Pinar Kür's translation of Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* (Shepard, 1977/2000) attacks, conquers, and recreates Shepard's text to assert her voice as a Turkish woman in the translation process. Not only has her voice as a woman, but her Turkish background come into existence especially in her rendition of Ella, the mother in the play, for the Turkish audience. This study will reveal the subtle ways that Pinar Kür's female, eastern voice sometimes overrides the male, western perspective offered through Shepard's text.

Keywords: translation, feminism, Pinar Kur, appropriation, *Curse of the Starving Class*

Sherry Simon (1996) believes that "translators and women have historically been the weaker figures in their respective hierarchies: translators are handmaidens to authors, women inferior to men" (p. 1). Although it is the translator who revives a work of art in the target language and reaches the hearts of the target audience through the words they understand, their existence is often lost in that translation. The target audience does not celebrate the translator, but the author, the 'real' owner of the text. However, this was not the case in the Turkish staging of Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*. A bold Turkish woman took Shepard's play and translated it according to her own worldview. In her case, she refused to be the handmaiden to an author; she repossessed the text to make "the feminine visible in language" (Lotbinière-Harwood, 1989, p. 9). Simply put, Pinar Kür boldly took control of the

¹ Pinar Kür is a female Turkish novelist/translator/academician/dramaturg who in her fiction concentrates mainly on issues revolving around women and their relationships with men. All translations in reference to Pinar Kür's play are mine.

process of translation and used it as an ideological weapon to inject the feminine into Shepard's masculinist text.

Translation is often regarded as a hierarchical process where the translator remains secondary to the author. The author's presence in a text cannot be challenged; a common assumption is made that the translator is merely transcribing the text into the language of the target audience. The author's presence is so strong that it is common to ignore the translator's effect upon the translated text. Sherry Simon (1996) compares women and the translated text by stating that "the original is considered the strong generative male, the translation the weaker and derivative female" (p. 1). This perception of translation as a sexed or gendered act that reifies the supremacy of the male has been so widespread that, as Lori Chamberlain (1988) has noted, the understanding of the distinction between writing and translation has led to a common view that the original is 'masculine' and the translation is "derivative and 'feminine'" (p. 455). There is also risk or threat involved in the process of translation, and this too carries racist freight. In her article "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation," Chamberlain (1988) indicates that "the reason translation is so overcoded, so overregulated, is that it threatens to erase the difference between production and reproduction which is essential to the establishment of power. Translations can, in short, masquerade as originals, thereby short-circuiting the system" (p. 466). There can be a gendered dimension to what is considered, in the process of translation, a "struggle for authority and the politics of originality" (p. 455) in the clash between the source text and its translation.

In the theatre, the struggle for authority over the translated text involves not only the author and the translator, but also the director, the actors, and the audience. As Gershon Shaked (1989) indicates in his article entitled "The Play: Gateway to Cultural Dialogue," the "process of translation leaves gaps and interstices between our own world and the image of the world created within us by what is read or viewed" (p. 7). In the case of theatre, the translator, the audience or reader, and the director (hereinafter referred to as the 'target culture') fill in these gaps in accordance with the culture they inhabit. The text transforms into something new and loses some of its original meaning derived from the culture it was created in (which hereinafter will be referred to as the 'source culture'). The translation of the text from the source culture proceeds through the following steps before it is converted for the reception of the 'target culture':

- 1) The text is translated in accordance with the interpretation of the translator and his/her choices of words are used in the translated text. This is the re-writing process.
- 2) The translated/re-written text is brought to the dramaturg, director, and the actors where it is re-read in accordance with the cultural teachings of the cast.
- 3) The translated/re-written and the re-read text is staged in front of a 'target' audience where it is re-perceived and re-interpreted to meet their cultural expectations.

After this process, the 'source' text no longer remains the same, since it loses some of its cultural peculiarities that cannot formulate any meaning in the 'target' culture. The translator is the one who initiates this metamorphosis of the source text and thus, is the first to contribute to the acculturation of the original.

As M. Rosario Martin (2005) states in "Gender(ing) Theory: Rethinking the Targets of Translation Studies in Parallel with Recent Developments in Feminism":

Translation has always been predetermined by the expectations and suspicions of a cultural system indisputably granting an absolute authority to the concept of 'Original', either the Original Text or the Original Author; expectations thus based on the ideals of Sameness and Mimesis, and suspicions (which are at basis of a whole popular imagery about translators as betrayers) that translations systematically flouted these ideals. (pp. 28-29)

However, as Martin adds, a translator—working in the period of globalization and experiencing the attendant continuing expansion in the field of intercultural communication—cannot isolate himself or herself from these developments. For this reason, in this era, a translator is required to be "involved in intercultural practices largely exceeding the traditional concept of translation based on a text-to-text relation" (Martin, 2005, p. 32). In Martin's terms, it might be argued that an intercultural translator has no choice but to betray.

To acknowledge a translator as a 'betrayed', one has to realize the power of translation in the construction of cultures. As Barbara Godard (1988) explains, translation is not merely reproducing a given text; rather it is an act of production. In Godard's words theorists working on gender and translation give power to the translator and "translation rejoins feminist textual theory in emphasizing the polyphony and self-reflexive elements of the translator's / rewriter's discourse" (1988, p. 50). Framed thus, translation can sometimes be understood or deployed as a soft weapon in ideological clashes. On this subject, Álvarez and Vidal (1996) state,

If we are aware that translating is not merely passing from one text to another, transferring words from one container to another, but rather transporting one entire culture to another with all that this entails, we realize just how important it is to become conscious of the ideology that underlies a translation. (p. 5)

Following up on this argument, Carmen Ríos and Manuela Palacios (2005) in their article titled "Translation, Nationalism and Gender Bias," argue that for many "female theoreticians of translation, feminist discourse offers the possibility to subvert and challenge patriarchal discourse, so that the source-text can be manipulated in accordance with the particular ideology of the translator" (p. 78).

Pinar Kür's translation of Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977/2000) reveals these workings through her treatment of Shepard's text. As David J. DeRose (1992) states of *Curse of the Starving Class* one can experience a trauma created from "the shattering of one's personal and cultural mythology, one's sense of self and the world" (p. 4). When the changes conducted upon Shepard's play by Pinar Kür (1977/2000) are analyzed, one can sense the struggles of a female translator to rescue the characters who are in fact starved for "selfhood, distinctiveness, satisfying roles" (Gilman, 1981, p. xxvi). As a female translator, Pinar Kür attacks, conquers, and recreates Shepard's text to assert her voice as a Turkish woman in the translation process. Not only her voice as a woman, but also her Turkish background become

expressed in the text, especially in the translator's rendition of Ella, the mother in the play, for the Turkish audience (Shepard, 1977/2000).

David J. DeRose (1992) states that

the 1950s were a time when the institution of the family began to dissolve; . . . when the society of parents no longer sustained its offsprings; and, when the myths of Hollywood's America were found sadly wanting by its youth. This was the advent of the postmodern era in America, when media-generated myths grew to such proportions and with such speed that they lost all connection to the reality from which they once sprang. They became hollow simulacra infiltrating all aspects of America's cultural identity, but no longer capable of sustaining its inhabitants. (DeRose, 1992, p. 3)

This is the America one finds in Sam Shepard's works, "[a] world in which reality as we know it proves an illusion and we find ourselves at odds with our environment, our beliefs, our heritage, our cultural myths, our sense of personal identity, even our spiritual selves" (DeRose, 1992, p. 4). *Curse of the Starving Class*, written in 1977, reflects the crises of the individual who has lost the connection to meaning and reality which have become whimsical and ambiguous in the twentieth century (Shepard, 1977/2000). Özcan Özer, the Turkish dramaturg for the 2008-2009 Ankara National Theatre production of the *Curse of the Starving Class* (*Aç Sınıfın Laneti*) comments:

The play represents the concept of the American Dream, which America, as the castle of capitalism, tries to spread. The play narrates the emptiness of this dream by presenting its consequences in a nuclear family. . . . The result of the loneliness and the lack of communication have created a typology of human beings who fear and even forget to touch one another. . . . The natural outcome of this loneliness and fear not only has shattered the individual lives, but also the nuclear family. The loss of the nuclear family is the first step in the dissolution of that nation. (Özer, 2008, p. 17)

The play is about this dissolved family who are about to lose their ranch in Southern California; however, their loss indicates much more than a piece of land. As Özer (2008) stresses, this play prophesies the dissolution of a nation by revealing the reasons and the consequences of the fall of the nuclear family.

David J. DeRose (1992) explains that "[t]he home—including the comforting reality the word *home* conventionally suggests—has been left exposed by the dissolution of the family and the estrangement of the mother and the father" (p. 93). The ineffectual parents are to blame for the eventual disintegration of the family in the plays of Sam Shepard. The therapeutic role of the mother in this destruction is specifically omitted by Shepard in *Curse of the Starving Class* (Shepard, 1981). As Carla J. McDonough (1996) argues, "in relegating his women to the margins, Shepard at the same time connects them with the 'marginal' activity of survival" (p. 65). With the sole instinct of survival, women "take action to avoid or escape the destruction that is overwhelming the men" (p. 68). "[W]ithout any consideration for the family at all" (Erben, 1987, p. 38), Ella strips herself of the socially acceptable motherly roles and sells the avocado ranch to a swindler named Taylor.

Ella's negative characterization is often affirmed on the American stage, since various reviews stress Ella's foolish, inconsiderate, ambitious characterization. For instance, Mel Gussow in the 1985 theatre review, written for *The New York Times*, states that "the mother is given a drily comic presence, as a smart country woman whose head can be turned by the flattery of a shifty lawyer" (1985, para. 4). William A. Henry III, underlines in his 1985 review for *Time Magazine* the "ruthless selfishness of the mother's ambitions, and her shameless attempt at larceny to fulfill them, against the depth of her yearning to rise from the starving to the self-assured class" (1985). Furthermore, Margaret Gray in her 2011 review for *Los Angeles Times* argues that Ella is "a venal mother . . . who enthusiastically betrays her children" (para. 5).

As opposed to Ella's negative representation in Sam Shepard's text and therefore the stage productions, Pınar Kür attempts to appropriate and even redeem or rescue Ella in her translation of the *Curse of the Starving Class* (Shepard, 1977/2000). Pınar Kür adds, omits, and even interprets some of the dialogues in the play to save Ella from being stereotyped as the monstrous woman. As Carla J. McDonough (1996) argues,

the male characters in Shepard's plays believe in the need to discredit, wipe-out, or erase the feminine whether within or outside of themselves in order to assert a 'macho' identity which their frontier (cowboy) mythos privileges as being truly manly, and (in Shepard's thinking) truly American. (1996, p. 66)

However, Pınar Kür does not allow Ella to be discredited, wiped-out or erased from the play. On the contrary, as Luise von Flotow (1991) observes, "with authorship and 'patriarchal language' demystified, the feminist translator can dare to be a resistant, aggressive and creative writer who not only tempers with the HE/Man aspects of conventional language, but intervenes in the text in many other ways" (p. 81). In these and other ways, Pınar Kür's translation (Shepard, 1977/2000) appears to resist and recreate the patriarchal text of Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*. In her translation, Pınar Kür (1977/2000) emphasizes Ella's feelings, justifies some of her actions, and presents the male characters as a threat to female identity, in order to challenge Sam Shepard's attitudes toward his character Ella.

To begin with, Pınar Kür (Shepard, 1977/2000) changes the character Shepard has created by emphasizing Ella's feelings and worries. Ella has decided to sell the ranch, just like Weston, and she tries to get her children to understand her actions and feelings. In Shepard's (1981) work as Ella explains to her son Wesley the reasons for her selling the house, Ella asks "Who takes care of this place" (p. 146). When Wesley indicates that he is the one who takes care of the place, Ella states, "I am not talking about maintenance. I'm talking about fixing it up. Making it look like somebody lives here. [and she asks] Do you do that?" (1981, p. 146). In the Turkish translation² Pınar Kür (Shepard, 1977/2000) translates this part with additions as follows: "I am not talking about the outer maintenance. I am talking about putting things in order, repair, making it look like something. Acting as if people live here." Instead of questioning Wesley by

² Ella: Kaba bakımdan söz etmiyorum ben. Düzeltmekten, onarmaktan, bir şeye benzetmekten söz ediyorum. Burada yaşayan birileri varmış gibi davranmaktan. Nerdee? (2000, p. 27)

saying "Do you do that?", Pınar Kür (1977/2000) makes Ella ask "Nerdeee?" (p. 27). This Turkish phrase can be translated as "Chance would be a fine thing." Through these lines, Pınar Kür puts emphasis on Ella's feeling of abandonment. She has been left to deal with the ranch and her children all alone. Her husband Weston, is a drunkard who rarely comes home. Ella's need for a home that evokes a feeling of belonging, order, repair, life in it, cannot be sensed in Shepard's dialogue.

Pınar Kür (Shepard,1977/2000) presents Ella's need for a home, but also her worry for her children's wellbeing. Emma, Ella's young daughter, has just begun menstruating for the first time and Ella gives Emma some advice on this issue. Sam Shepard (Shepard, 1981) gives this scene as Ella speaks to herself while cooking. Emma is not on stage, but enters as this speech finishes and Ella speaks "as though she's just continuing the conversation":

Now I know the first thing you'll think is that you've hurt yourself. That's only natural. You'll think that something drastic has gone wrong with your insides and that's why you're bleeding. That's only a natural reaction. But I want you to know the truth. I want you to know all the facts before you go off and pick up a lot of lies. Now, the first thing is that you should never go swimming when that happens. It can cause you to bleed to death. The water draws it out of you. (1981, pp. 138-139)

Although in the dialogue Pınar Kür (Shepard,1977/2000) remains loyal to the source text, she adds words and sentences to highlight Ella's worry over her daughter. For example, in the source text, Ella (Shepard, 1981) states "I want you to know all the facts before you go off and pick up a lot of lies" (p. 139). Whereas in the Turkish translation³ Ella states "I am certainly not going to let you fill your ears with lies. I will tell you the truth behind everything" (Shepard,1977/2000, p. 139). She also emphasizes that Emma must not swim during menstruation, since she says it is 'forbidden', and that the water will pull the blood out of Emma and will 'run and run,' and nothing can stop it, implying she would die. Pınar Kür (1977/2000) has added so much emphasis to the Turkish translation that she seems to be trying to present Ella not as an ignorant mother who is passing on her foolish knowledge to her child, but as a stereotypical overly worried mother, who would go as far as to play the fool in order to scare her children so that they would keep away from danger.

Pınar Kür (Shepard,1977/2000) not only aims to present a more compassionate Ella who longs to have a real home, but she also creates an aura of innocence around Ella. This is emphasized when Wesley and his father, Weston, are talking about selling the house. The original reads (Shepard, 1981):

Weston: You can watch me all you want to. You won't find out a thing.

Wesley: Mom is trying to sell the place, too.

³ Ella: Gidip bir sürü yalan dolanla kulağını doldurmana izin verecek değilim. Her şeyin doğrusunu anlatacağım sana. Şimdi, en önemlisi, bu iş başına geldi mi, yüzmek yok. Yasak. Yoksa kan kaybından ölürsün. Suya girdiğin anda, o su kanı bööööyle çeker içinden. Akar da akar. Durdurmanın imkanı yok! (1977/2000, p. 15)

(Weston looks at him hard.)

Wesley: That's who the lawyer guy was. She's selling it through him. (1981, p. 169)

The Turkish translation⁴ omits the dialogue where Wesley tells his father that Ella is also selling the house. This omission merely works to take the betrayal off of Ella's shoulders and acts as if to suggest that the lawyer is the one who has fooled Ella into selling the house. In addition to this omission, Pınar Kür (Shepard, 1977/2000) specifically omits another significant dialogue, which would have destroyed Ella in the eyes of the Turkish audience. When Ella informs Wesley of her intentions to sell the house and for all of them to travel to Europe, Wesley (Shepard, 1981) refuses going to Europe since whatever Europe has, "High art. Paintings. Castles. Buildings. Fancy food," also exists in America. Ella is disappointed in Wesley's negative reaction and states,

Ella: Why aren't you sensitive like your Grandfather was? I always thought you were just like him, but you're not, are you?

Wesley: No.

Ella: Why aren't you? You're circumcised just like him. It is almost identical in fact.

Wesley: How do you know?

Ella: I looked. I looked at them both and I could see the similarity.

Wesley: He's dead. (1981, pp: 143-144)

In the Turkish translation⁵ Ella's last sentence emphasizes the fact that she can see the similarity since she has looked at her father's and her son's penis is excluded. The Turkish dialogue can be roughly translated as:

Ella: I wish you could be a sensitive person like your grandfather. I always believed you were just like him. But in fact, unfortunately, you are not.

Wesley: I know.

Ella: Why don't you resemble him? You are circumcised just like him? Both are almost identical.

Wesley: Grandpa died.

Pınar Kür (Shepard, 1977/2000) appears to have omitted this sentence in order to save Ella from a certain judgment on the Turkish stage. As in many cultures, looking at and talking about

⁴ Weston: Eeeeh, istediğin kadar gözetle. Bir şey öğrenecek değilsin nasıl olsa.
Wesley: Avukat herif o işte. Annem onun aracılığıyla satıyor. (1977/2000, p. 63)

⁵ Ella: Büyükbaban gibi hassas biri olmanı ne kadar çok isterdim. Hep ona benzediğine inandım. Ama aslında benzemiyorsun ne yazık ki.

Wesley: Biliyorum.

Ella: Neden benzemiyorsun? Sen de aynı onun gibi sünnetlisin. İkinizinki hemen hemen aynı.

Wesley: Büyükbabam öldü. (2000, p. 22-23)

a man's penis is not quite acceptable in the Turkish society⁶. In fact, the word 'penis' is not used directly in Shepard's dialogue either; instead it is implied through the word 'circumcision'. Pınar Kür's (1977/2000) exclusion of this item of dialogue, among some of her other alterations and omissions, makes Ella's acceptance by the Turkish audience easier, since she does not look at her father and son's penises as Sam Shepard's Ella does.

On top of presenting a more suitable Ella for the Turkish reader/audience by changing the translation and even omitting some dialogue, Pınar Kür (Shepard,1977/2000) also tries to present Ella's oppression by making additions to the dialogues of the male characters, in ways that present them as more ruthless than in Shepard's original play. For instance, in Pınar Kür's translation, Ella's husband becomes an awful monster and an extra negative father figure when compared to Shepard's representation. When Weston comes home with a lot of artichokes and is busy placing them in the refrigerator, Wesley approaches him silently. Stunned Weston remarks "What the hell are you sneakin' up like that for? You coulda' got yourself killed!" (Shepard, 1981, p. 157). In the Turkish⁷ language this becomes something like "why the shit are you sneaking up? What if I killed you?" (Shepard, 1977/2000, p. 44). Moreover, Weston's cruel attitude towards Wesley is emphasized when Weston comments on Wesley's speech. In Shepard, Weston states "What! Don't talk with your voice in the back of your throat like a worm! Talk with your teeth! Talk!" (Shepard, 1981, p. 164). Whereas in the translation⁸ Pınar Kür (Shepard 1977/2000) writes "What? Don't talk from inside your mouth like you are chewing the cud (like an animal). Open your mouth to talk. Talk!" Kür has Weston resemble his son to a bovine animal. Weston's cruel personality is being accentuated in the Turkish through the additions of several other profane words which do not exist in the source text. Furthermore, Weston and other male characters frequently call Ella 'karı' which is a derogative word used to indicate a loose, shrewish, hag like, and shortly a bitchy woman. No such epithets are used in Sam Shepard's original to describe Ella. With various other additions, Pınar Kür's male characters in *Curse of the Starving Class* (Shepard, 1977/2000) become more jealous, dangerous, abusive characters, who would threaten the wellbeing of any woman.

All in all, Kür's transformation of Shepard's text shifts its authorship, and by implication, some of its Western, male perspectives, into a liminal, intercultural space. *The Curse of the Starving Class* by Sam Shepard (1981) becomes *Aç Sinifin Laneti*, a Sam Shepard play translated by the Turkish female translator Pınar Kür (1977/2000). In the intercultural space of translation, her voice as translator anticipating and cushioning the effects of her Turkish audience

⁶ However, even if one tries to translate the word 'penis' into Turkish, s/he will encounter various problems, since there is no Turkish equivalent for the word. The word penis, very similar to its use in English, is borrowed directly from the 17th century Latin or French word 'pénis,' and is pronounced in Turkish as 'pe-nē-s'. The other words used to describe the male organ are only used in the slang or child language.

⁷ Weston: Ne bok yemeğe öyle sinsi sinsi yaklaşıyorsun? Ya seni gebertseydim? (1977/2000, p. 44)

⁸ Weston: Ne? Öyle ağzının içinde konuşmasana geviş getirir gibi. Ağzını aç da öyle konuş. Konuş! (1977/2000, p. 55)

emerges in ways that overlay and displace that of the American male playwright and his characters. Although Kür does not impose drastic alterations on the source text, in some instances she does make subtle but important adjustments to the source text for the target culture audience. As Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood (1989) has declared, a female translator's duty is to "make the feminine visible in language. Because making the feminine visible in language means making women seen and heard in the real world. Which is what feminism is all about" (p. 9). Whatever Kür's personal politics, in her negotiation of this intercultural space, gendered social expectations and judgements that inhere in one cultural context but which are different in another mean that intercultural values are gendered values. Negotiating these values in the liminal space between one culture and another means that Kür makes pro-female choices, which cushion the mother figure of the play, in particular, from eastern judgement. These acts of translation draw attention to perhaps unintended nuances in the statement that the theorist of theatre translation J.T. Barbarese has made, that "translation has always been a means of self-preservation" (2010, p. 58).

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