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**Gendering Translation:  
The ‘Female Voice’ in Postcolonial Senegal**

**By Georgina Collins**

...les femmes ont leur propre sensibilité...elles ont leur propres problèmes. Elles ont leur propre approche de la vie et de la société. Donc elles écrivent forcément différemment.<sup>1</sup>

...women have their own sensitivities... they have their own issues. They have their own approach to life and society. So they are bound to write differently.<sup>2</sup>

Amadou Lamine Sall

Whilst the subject of gendered writing in the ‘West’ has been discussed in depth by writers and academics from George Eliot and Anne Garréta to Judith Lorber and Judith Butler,<sup>3</sup> rarely has it been analysed in relation to Senegalese women’s literature, a corpus which comparatively has not been studied in depth at all.<sup>4</sup> Even cursory analysis of Senegalese women’s writing reveals some striking contrasts: while some Western writers of the last two centuries may have attempted to challenge popular conceptions of female writing, for ‘writing like a woman’ has perhaps carried with it some form of literary shame, conjuring up notions of ‘weakness’ or apparent ‘simplicity,’ at first sight Senegalese women’s literature appears to embrace the feminine, both in subject matter and language.

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<sup>1</sup> Amadou Lamine Sall, *Personal Interview* (10 Jun. 2008), p11. All transcripts of interviews are available from Georgina Collins on request.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise marked, all translations are by Georgina Collins.

<sup>3</sup> See bibliography for relevant texts.

<sup>4</sup> Although a number of papers have been written on individual Senegalese women writers or select fragments of the corpus, there are very few monographs available. However, noteworthy texts include Susan Stringer’s *The Senegalese Novel by Women* and Lisa McNee’s *Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women’s Autobiographical Discourses*.

For a number of decades now, contemporary women authors in Senegal have focused on retelling history through their own, ‘female’ eyes and with their own ‘female’ voices, and it is the presence of these distinctive voices that is remarked upon by esteemed Senegalese poet and publisher, Amadou Lamine Sall and is the primary motivation for this article. For, whilst the notion of a female voice may have been discussed at length in other contexts, the unique gender-based structures of Senegalese society offer an interesting platform upon which to base a study of female voice. Moreover, to advance this research beyond previous analyses and in a literary environment in which an increasing number of Francophone African texts are being translated into English, Sall’s observation also raises the question as to how a translator may rewrite this unique female voice in the English language. So, this research is distinct from previous studies because it does not analyse the challenging task of translating grammatical gender from standard French into English which has already been investigated to a large extent by scholars such as Ina Schabert, Savoyane Henri-Lepage or Emma Parker.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it analyses the more subtle notion of the unique female Senegalese voice described by Sall, its manifestation in Francophone postcolonial literature and how this can be translated into English.

Writing in the shadow of the colonial and postcolonial education systems and publishing practices that until recently favoured the ‘masculine,’ women authors from Senegal have established a rich body of poetry and prose.<sup>6</sup> However, at present the corpus of Senegalese women’s writing in English translation is incredibly small, with only a handful of novels and individual poems available.<sup>7</sup> And despite the number of high-profile Senegalese

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<sup>5</sup> See bibliography for relevant texts.

<sup>6</sup> My complete bibliography of Francophone Senegalese women authors, compiled at the end of 2010, includes texts from over 90 writers working within different genres, writing in a wide range of styles and embracing a large diversity of subjects.

<sup>7</sup> Whilst many male writers from Senegal (eg Léopold Sédar Senghor, Ousmane Sembène, Birago Diop or Boubacar Boris Diop) have gained international success for their works and have been translated many times over, very few women’s texts can be bought overseas either in French or in translation. The only real

writers coming to the fore, until now there has been little analysis of their works from the perspective of Translation Studies, including translation methodologies. Hence, this article attempts both to raise awareness of their works of literature and to investigate the systems which have set these female writers apart from their male counterparts, exploring the linguistic impact on literature of unique female societal groups. It also highlights the significance of translation into English which can offer a new forum in which to explore an African culture that has rarely been communicated before in the world's current primary *lingua franca*, also providing a stimulus for discussion on how this culture can be transferred from an African to an Anglophone context through the medium of the French language.

Embracing the theme of the 'Francosphere' by analysing and experimenting with the movement of the French language as it crosses literal and figurative borders, this article breaks down more generalised notions of what translation in a postcolonial context entails by studying Senegalese women's literature in its own right rather than as belonging to a broad corpus of Francophone texts, often studied comparatively in relation to the colonial centre. This article exemplifies the diversity of the discipline of French and Francophone Studies today, which necessarily spans several centuries, but also encompasses research that crosses a number of different disciplines, including that of Translation Studies, a field of research that, often controversially, brings together both the practical and the theoretical. By applying translation theory to the practical process of translation, this article offers a new critical perspective on the act and analysis of translation within an academic context, exploring the linguistic transition from the 'Francosphere' to the 'Anglosphere', but also the

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exceptions to this are the works of Mariama Bâ: *Une si longue lettre* and *Un chant écarlate*, *La grève des bàttu* by Aminata Sow Fall and Ken Bugul's *Le baobab fou*, which have all been well received in translation. More recently some women's poetry has been translated in anthologies including *The Other Half of History* in 2007 (Collins) and *A Rain of Words* in 2009 (d'Almeida); however these works focus on Africa generally rather than Senegal specifically.

interconnection between French Studies and Translation Studies and the tension between the practical and the theoretical.

This is a highly important area of research, because it has barely been touched upon before. Whilst theorists such as Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, Eric Cheyfitz, Vicente Rafael and Tejaswini Niranjana have written on the subject of postcolonial translation theory,<sup>8</sup> there are far fewer academics who focus on translating Francophone Africa. Extensive studies include Kwaku A. Gyasi's *The Francophone African Text: Translation and the Postcolonial Experience* from 2006, and Paul Bandia's 2008 book entitled *Translation as Reparation: Writing and Translation in Postcolonial Africa*. However, these examples take a more generic approach to postcolonial translation rather than examining one specific country or set of writers. Bandia states that the focus of postcolonial translation theory differs from standard translation theory in that it accounts for 'the layering of cultures and discourses' present in a postcolonial text,<sup>9</sup> and his theory is one that rings true with the translation analysis in this article which explores gendered language as one of those cultural layers. However, what is intended in this research is to build upon such theories by applying them to specific case studies within a new cultural arena, examining the traditional and modern roles of women in Senegal to discover the resulting impact upon postcolonial texts and the ensuing translation strategies.

It must be stated that postcolonial literary translation strategies can vary from faithful to adaptation and all that lies in between, and because literary translation is now frequently considered an act of creative rewriting, for the most part all those translation processes, even the ones that significantly depart from the sound or meaning of the source text, are embraced

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<sup>8</sup> See bibliography for relevant texts.

<sup>9</sup> Bandia, Paul., *Translation as Reparation: Writing and Translation in Postcolonial Africa* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2008), p.6.

in academic circles.<sup>10</sup> In its discussion of translation therefore, this article takes the stance that, faithful or otherwise, translators must be the closest readers of a text even if they choose not to render all aspects of that piece of work in translation. Hence, any close reading of Senegalese women's literature must include a consideration of gendered language, if it does indeed exist. *If* and *why* the translator chooses to replicate a female language in translation are matters for the individual translator and are usually based on the translation skopos (goal or purpose).<sup>11</sup> *How* gendered language may be translated into English is explored here, first by looking at the development of female Senegalese education and its relevance to French language usage in literature, and secondly by exploring the notion of community and observations on women's language use in the formation of a distinct female voice.

This article takes a distinctive theoretical and practical stance that supports the position of renowned translation scholars Basil Hatim and Ian Mason who claim that 'the best translators of works of literature are often said to be those who are most 'in tune' with the original author.'<sup>12</sup> Whilst the values of words such as 'best,' and 'in tune' are difficult to define precisely, this notion of compatibility and understanding between a writer and translator is one that is echoed by many different theorists and writers. In fact, Senegalese novelist, Sokhna Benga feels that the translator should have 'un respect de cette [ma] culture, que l'étranger ou l'étrangère qui a mon texte entre les mains, mon texte traduit, puisse ressentir ce que je ressens'<sup>13</sup> ('a respect for this [my] culture, so that the foreigner, male or female, who is holding my text, my translated text, can feel what I feel.' So, it appears that translation requires an understanding and identification with the source text writer, but clearly the extent to which this is realised in practice is once more dependent upon the individual

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<sup>10</sup> In non-academic circles, audience expectations of what a translation of a particular text 'should be' often influence the translation strategy, hence in many cases (apart from theatre), adaptation is less frequent.

<sup>11</sup> Hans J. Vermeer., 'Skopos and Commission in Translational Action', in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Venuti, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, trans. by Andrew Chesterman (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 227-238.

<sup>12</sup> Hatim, Basil, and Ian Mason., *Discourse and the Translator* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.11.

<sup>13</sup> Sokhna Benga, *Personal Interview* (15 Jun. 2008), p.10.

rewriting the text. Some scholars and translators may say that a search for and an analysis of female voice in translation is an unnecessary task, whilst others may believe it is essential part of pre-translation analysis. Either way, the manifestation of a unique female Senegalese voice must be defined before it can ever be translated in literature.

Turning firstly to defined education systems, as emphasised above, disparity in Senegalese education is often related to colonisation; however gender segregation in education did not begin and end with the colonisers. Whilst the French administration can be held partly responsible for male/female separation within an education system that favoured young men, even during pre-colonial times girls and boys experienced different initiation rites<sup>14</sup> and traditional society prepared men for leadership roles in public life and the family, and women for life in the home. Even today, despite women taking top roles in education, business and government,<sup>15</sup> the power of traditional patriarchy and the legacy of colonialism still prevails in Senegalese society, with poverty and illiteracy remaining a barrier to women's equality,<sup>16</sup> factors that are linked to education and clearly have a powerful influence over language. The Senegalese education system might be more accessible to women, but they occupy just 20% of university places,<sup>17</sup> and the rest of the female population receives very little or no education in French at all, leading to stark variations in French linguistic ability. Thus, it would make sense to explore the idea that women's writing in French differs according to the extent to which authors have been educated in the colonial or postcolonial systems, and to investigate what use further analysis of female education can be to the translator.

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<sup>14</sup> Ihechukwu Madubuike, *The Senegalese Novel: A Sociological Study of the Impact of the Politics of Assimilation* (Washington: Three Continents, 1983), pp. 68-69.

<sup>15</sup> Note Eugénie Rokhaya Aw who is the Director of the Centre d'Études des Sciences et Techniques de l'Information (CESTI), a public school of journalism linked to Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar. Following the success of a number of her businesses, Adja Dior Diop is now President of the ASFCE (Association Sénégalaise des Femmes Chefs d'Entreprise), and Mame Madior Boye was the first female Prime Minister of Senegal from 2001 to 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Penda Mbow, *Personal Interview* (17 Jun. 2008), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Mbow, p. 5.

In fact, it could be said that there are tri-directional forces at play in the translation of Francophone Senegalese women's literature. Firstly, there are 'traditional teachings,' secondly, '(post)colonial education' and thirdly 'interlingual translation.'<sup>18</sup> Looking firstly at education, in the analysis of the corpus it appears that the way female Senegalese writers put words on the page is significantly influenced by their amount or lack of colonial schooling as opposed to traditional forms of learning. This may vary according to the era, with more recent writers most likely to have been fully educated in the French system from childhood and to have gained a place at University. On the other hand, those writers who published closer to the date of independence were far more likely not to have experienced an education in French right through to university level. Because of this, the French they use may not be as fully 'assimilated,' i.e. the language of an author may not take a standard form due to the fact that the writer may be thinking in her first language<sup>19</sup> and writing in her second or third language, for instance. The variation in education experience has created three different forms in which women express themselves through language in literature. And if three different ways of writing have developed, should the translator be considering three distinct forms of translation? And what implications does this have for academics working in the fields of both Translation Studies and Francophone Postcolonial Studies?

Initially consider the poet Kiné Kirama Fall who was born in Rufisque in Senegal in 1934 and did not attend 'French' school or university, nor did she receive a religious education in French. Perhaps in relation to this, the language she uses in her poetry across two collections reveals a certain narrowness of French vocabulary. As an observation rather than a criticism, this reality may assist the translator in word selection, for the minimalist

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<sup>18</sup> In his paper 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,' Roman Jakobson defines three different types of translation; intralingual (rewording) so translation within one language, interlingual (translation proper) ie between different languages, and intersemiotic (transmutation): between different genres.

<sup>19</sup> The six national languages of Senegal are Wolof, Pular, Sereer, Jola, Mandinka and Soninke. Wolof is the *lingua franca*, spoken by over 80% of the population.



quality of her language is a key characteristic of the source text which can be replicated in translation:

Belle, belle et brune  
 C'est un don du ciel  
 Depuis le sein de ma mère  
 Belle, belle et brune  
 C'est un don du ciel  
 Et la tendresse de ma terre<sup>20</sup>

Brown, brown and beautiful  
 A gift from the skies  
 Since mother's breast  
 Brown, brown and beautiful  
 A gift from the skies  
 And my earth's tenderness<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, there are younger female writers who have been born and brought up post-independence and educated in the French system. They have lived abroad, worked in 'modern' (or Western constructions of what modern may be) environments where French is spoken and French culture has been embraced. In exploring texts by these writers, little difference can be extracted between their works and those by female French authors, apart from subject matter. The poet, Aminata Ndiaye is an example of this. She was born over a decade after independence in 1974, educated in the French system, doing her PhD at the

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<sup>20</sup> Kiné Kirama Fall, *Chants de la rivière fraîche* (Dakar: NEA, 1975), p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Earth, land, soil or ground are all valid translations of 'terre.' Here 'earth' was chosen because, like the French, it can have a both a broad and specific meaning i.e. 'world,' and 'land' or 'soil.'

Sorbonne in Paris before returning to the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar,<sup>22</sup> where most communication is in French. She writes:

Méconnaissable Sahel,<sup>23</sup>

Pays de *Mame Linguère!*<sup>24</sup>

Toi jadis si fier

De ton visage de grâce

Qui effaçait les affres

Inspirant jeux tendres

Et langage du bonheur<sup>25</sup>

Unrecognisable Sahel,

Land of *Mame Linguère!*

So proud yesteryear

Of your graceful face

Which erased the pains

To inspire tender games

And language of joy

Thus, ‘gendered’ writing in relation to education is less about writing the ‘feminine’ but instead the female Senegalese corpus as a whole is an embodiment of the diversity of women writers’ experience in the French language.

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<sup>22</sup> Aminata Ndiaye, *Brumes et brouillards* (Dakar: Nègre International, 2005), p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> The poem, entitled ‘Sahel’ speaks of the ancient Wolof kingdom of Kayor and its king or ‘Damel,’ the most famous of which was Lat Dior Diop who died in battle protecting his territory against the French. He is the subject of a well-known epic tale and of a poem by Senghor entitled ‘Lat Dior, Le Kayor, l’impossible déficit.’

<sup>24</sup> ‘Linguère’ is the name of a département and town in the north-west (formerly Saint-Louis region) of Senegal and it also means mother or sister of the king. ‘Maam’ means grandparent or ancestor in Wolof. This is therefore most likely to refer to an ancient female ancestor of Lat Dior Diop (possibly now a Wolof spirit).

<sup>25</sup> Ndiaye, p. 18.

This holds interest for scholars working in the field of Francophone Postcolonial Studies: as an increasing number of Francophone texts are read and studied in translation, it could be said that the translator has a significant responsibility towards the development of this body of literature. This responsibility is founded on two points; firstly, because in the past those writers whose novels are translated have received critical acclaim, thus translation can lead to commendation, and secondly, because the translator is the key to re-communicating to a wider (possibly international) audience those very identities so carefully constructed by the Senegalese writer before her. Being translated can mean being read and being heard on often a global platform. So, if the translator has a responsibility towards the writers and communication of their work in the English language, surely then this means she should consider all facets of the source text in translation. And if an integral part of the source text is its unique female voice, then it follows that an attempt to replicate such a characteristic in English is part of the translator's task.

However, this is challenging. These manifestations of language are complicated by the fact that educated women sometimes use their writing ability to embrace and heighten awareness of more general female Senegalese experience. Senegalese scholar, feminist activist, and former Minister for Culture, Penda Mbow states that women such as her, who have had the opportunity to be educated, have a duty to raise women's issues in society in order to liberate women and ensure societal progress with regard to their roles.<sup>26</sup> In view of this statement, an author's aptitude for writing French is thus influenced at times by her attempt to represent the lives of ordinary Senegalese women past and present, rather than her own disparate life situated in a very small academic world. The following extract from a poem by Annette Mbaye d'Erneville is an excellent example of this, for the lucidity of its

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<sup>26</sup> Mbow, p. 2.

language may not be considered representative of her extensive career and education in France and Senegal:

Danse, Négrresse marron!  
 Le Blanc applaudit  
 Le Blanc rit de bon cœur  
 Danse, Négrresse marron  
 Retrouve les pas de la danse du fouet!  
 Tes reins souples tu les dois  
 À ton aïeule guinéenne que tu ne connais pas<sup>27</sup>

Dance, maroon<sup>28</sup> Negress!  
 White man applauds  
 White man laughs heartily  
 Dance, maroon Negress  
 Recover the steps of the whip dance!  
 Your supple back you owe  
 To a Guinean grandmother you never knew<sup>29</sup>

An attempt has been made here to replicate the same clarity of language in English translation with the only obvious deviation from standard English being the loss of the definite article, a stylistic liberty taken in translation which enhances the rhythm and unpretentious language of the ‘original’<sup>30</sup> text. In line with the focus around the central

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<sup>27</sup> *Poètes d’Afrique et des Antilles: Anthologie*, ed. by Hamidou Dia (Paris: Table Ronde, 2002), pp. 156-157.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Marron’ could be translated as ‘brown,’ but here it is most likely to mean ‘runaway slave.’ This has not been translated as such, due to a desire to capture the rhythm of the poem. Instead the word has been translated as ‘maroon,’ thereby finding a balance between sound and meaning.

<sup>29</sup> *The Other Half of History: A Bilingual Anthology of Francophone African Women’s Poetry*, ed. by Georgina Collins, trans. by Georgina Collins (Coventry: Heaventree, 2007), p. 103.

<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that ‘originality’ in translation is contestable, for even a ‘source text’ will be influenced by other texts and the cultures that surround it.

notion of realising an affinity with a source text writer, the translations here demonstrate that by studying culture alongside literature it is possible to gather information that may change the way a translator works by influencing her particular choices in vocabulary.

But whilst it is possible to isolate shifts in language use due to differing levels of education in French, do men and women actually write in distinct ways? Writers Mame Seck Mbacké and Benga, who have been educated to a high level in the French system, believe there is now little difference between male and female writing in Senegal.<sup>31</sup> So, when men and women are educated in the French system and become part of that Europhone educated ‘elite,’ do the barriers between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ writing become somewhat blurred and traditions more distant, and is the gender of a piece of literature harder to identify? This may be so for Benga and Seck Mbacké, but in the quotation that began this article, Sall commented that women write about their own issues and approaches to life and society and therefore they write differently.<sup>32</sup> This statement can be supported to a certain degree: a text such as Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre*, for instance, clearly sees Senegalese life from a female perspective,<sup>33</sup> however, it would be incorrect to say that every piece of women’s literature from Senegal does the same.

It seems that, as more women receive education alongside men, the differentiation between female and male writing is harder to make, but distinctions do still exist in writing past and present, because education has varied and still does so. What is key to this research, therefore, is the development of a dynamic cultural approach to translation and the movement of ideas and issues relevant to Senegalese women from the Francosphere to the Anglosphere. These case studies allow for a communication of these concepts beyond their initial

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<sup>31</sup> Mame Seck Mbacké, *Personal Interview* (11 Jun. 2008), p.12; Benga, p.4.

<sup>32</sup> Sall, p.11.

<sup>33</sup> Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre* (Monaco: Motifs, 2005)

publication, but to develop a dynamic cultural approach it is also vital to go beyond an analysis of formal education to social education in more general terms.

The notion of gendered writing also appears to be related to the formation of distinct female communities which embrace unique forms of communication. In fact, the research of Tamara Underwood highlights a general difference between male and female language use in Senegal. In her study of women in the village of Niaga-Wolof, she describes the way in which women form social and organisational discussion groups, to talk of their daily lives or plan special occasions, and the clearly-defined and very separate roles undertaken by men and women.<sup>34</sup> It is my understanding from experience of living in the village of Ndiobène in Senegal, that these different roles exist whether women are formally educated or not. Generally, men and women continue to form distinct social groups, so it would be assumed that language over time has developed in different ways.

Nigerian scholar, Aissata Sidikou confirms this, commenting on a ‘female language’ that communicates the way women perceive themselves.<sup>35</sup> Hence, there is definitely an understanding that women communicate in a different way, a way which reflects their society, power often lying in a sense of community amongst other women. Further, if as academic Kwaku Gyasi states, ‘contemporary African writers ‘translate’ their African vision, their cultural values and language, into the European medium of expression,’<sup>36</sup> the visions of men and women are going to be vastly different, and therefore their language. An analysis of education may demonstrate diversity of female experience in the French language, but difference also lies in women’s distinct gendered approach to language use. Hence, can a

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<sup>34</sup> Tamara Underwood, *Femmes wolof: Pouvoirs et savoirs-faire* (Dakar: Enda, 1988), p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Aissata Sidikou, *Recreating Words, Reshaping Worlds: The Verbal Art of Women from Niger, Mali and Senegal* (Trenton: Africa WP, 2001), p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Kwaku Gyasi, *The Francophone African Text: Translation and the Postcolonial Experience* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 9.

standard strategy of semantic translation<sup>37</sup> suffice here or will it only serve to iron out linguistic character? In the translation of a relatively untouched Francophone corpus, surely capturing difference between texts is as important as portraying the nuances of an individual text in itself.

In general terms, research into language use supports the notion of female familiarity in communication, stating that women speak about emotion more than men.<sup>38</sup> Further, researcher Dan Spender comments upon the way in which women and men develop different ‘conversation codes’ which set up patterns of talk between people of different sexes.<sup>39</sup> He states that gendered speech is present early in life when people visibly amend their body language, vocabulary and volume according to the gender of a baby,<sup>40</sup> but this will of course vary from one language to another. Elizabeth Abel’s book on *Writing and Sexual Difference*<sup>41</sup> also makes it clear that some generalities regarding male and female language use can be learnt, but this differs from culture to culture.

Other academics pinpoint more exacting characteristics to define male and female language application. In *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, George Steiner remarks upon the ‘universal’ difference between male and female language use of identical words and constructs,<sup>42</sup> commenting that:

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<sup>37</sup> In *A Textbook of Translation*, Peter Newmark stated that the common semantic approach to literary translation is accurate and economic, allowing for contextual meaning, aesthetic value and cultural understanding of the source text. However, it may be considered restrictive in comparison to more creative strategies for translation that are not seeking ‘economy’ of expression.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Sex Similarities and Differences: Volume 1.’ *Encyclopedia of Women and Gender*, ed. by Judith Worell (New York: Academic Press, 2001), p. 397.

<sup>39</sup> Dan Spender, *The Writing of the Sex or: Why You Don’t Have to Read Women’s Writing to Know it’s No Good* (New York: Pergamon, 1989), p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Spender, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Abel, *Writing and Sexual Difference* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), pp. 1-7.

<sup>42</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 40.

At a rough guess, women's speech is richer than men's in those shadings of desire and futurity known in Greek and Sanskrit as optative; women seem to verbalize a wider range of qualified resolve and masked promise.<sup>43</sup>

Whilst a statement beginning with 'at a rough guess' may not initially attract confidence in Steiner's beliefs, it is interesting here that he speaks about the richness of the optative mode (expressing choice or wish), which is very evident in the following poem by Awa Ndiaye:

Les mots que je veux te dire  
Sur mes lèvres se bousculent.

Je confie au vent des serments d'amour  
Que je croyais ne jamais dire.

Je t'espère et une douce volupté me prend.  
J'ai soif de ton corps d'amour et de désir...

Je sais que demain sera pour nous!<sup>44</sup>

The words I want to tell you  
Spring around upon my lips

I confide in the wind the pledges of love  
That I believed never to tell.

I crave you and sweet pleasure seizes me.  
I thirst for your body of love and desire...

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<sup>43</sup> Steiner, p. 42.

<sup>44</sup> Awa Ndiaye, *Hymne(s) à l'amour* (Dakar: Nègre International, 2005), p. 29.



I know tomorrow will be for us!

This poem clearly demonstrates a wide variety of language to express desire and futurity, the range of which has been transferred to the target text. Steiner's comment that this resolve and promise is not absolute, but concealed in some way, supports the idea that Senegalese women writers express themselves despite the fact that elements of the cultures in which they live have been oppressive to their articulation. The first half of the poem represents a certain inhibition in her words, as if she has been holding back her feelings for a long time. For this reason, the words do not 'line up' on her lips, but 'jostle' or 'spring around' as if she is hesitant to express herself. She confides in the wind, and whilst her feelings are certain, the directness of her speech is not, as she ponders: 'That I believed never to tell.' The poem in French conveys the attribute of 'masked promise' described by Steiner, which is translated effectively here into the target text.

Using Steiner's observations to enlighten the analysis and translation of a text is a unique strategy, which furthers previous approaches to cultural analysis and rewriting of literary texts by promoting a 'theoretical turn' in translation practice. It demonstrates that a literary translator who is well read in the intricacies of translation theory will find this knowledge of great use in the practicalities of translation. Drawing upon the theorising of scholars such as Steiner, for example, in attempt to define a women's language, can instigate a re-evaluation of the translator's list of priorities. However, theoretical social observations that can be applied to textual analysis pre-translation can be taken from fields beyond the strict confines of Translation or Francophone Studies and used to strengthen and enhance any strategy for translation. For example, with regard to women's language in Senegal

specifically, feminist activist Penda Mbow claims that Senegalese women do have a distinct way of talking and are known for their chitchat:

Elles savent parler, elles savent s'exprimer. Et je suis toujours émerveillée par la richesse du lexique chez les femmes wolofs... C'est vrai que le discours sur l'amour est très riche, le discours sur la façon de gérer la famille, le mari, etc., ce sont les discours très, très riches. Il est vrai que l'univers de la femme est différent ici de l'univers de l'homme, qu'on le veuille ou non et cela se répercute sur le discours.<sup>45</sup>

They know how to speak, they know how to express themselves. And I am always amazed by the richness of the vocabulary of Wolof women... Certainly, discourse on love is very rich, discourse on the way the family is managed, the husband etc. – those areas are very very rich. Certainly, a woman's world is different here to a man's world, and whether you want it or not that has repercussions upon discourse.

This very much reinforces Steiner's statement above, as well as the earlier assertion that women find power through community. Further, if women's language with other women is very distinct from conversations with or amongst men, then the translator must be careful to replicate register, tone and the nuances of specific words, without assuming that the oral nature of these conversations means that vocabulary must be 'simple' – women's language is claimed to be very rich, especially when there is a personal connection.

In his discourse on female language, Steiner continues to assert that:

Feminine uses of the subjunctive in European languages give to material facts and relations a characteristic *vibrato*. I do not say that they lie about the obtuse, resistant fabric of the world: they multiply the facets of reality, they strengthen the adjective to allow it an

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<sup>45</sup> Mbow, p. 6.

alternative nominal status, in way which men often find unnerving. There is a strain of ultimatum, a separatist stance, in the masculine intonation of the first-person pronoun; the 'I' of women intimates a more patient bearing, or did until Women's Liberation.... (42)

Using Steiner's observations of the use of subjunctive, strengthening of the adjective and the 'patient' first person, it is interesting to look at the published translation of *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ to see if these textual characteristics have been transferred to the target text. For example:

Non, **je** n'ai pas peur de la lutte sur le plan de l'idéologie; mais dans un parti politique, il est rare que la femme **ait** la percée facile... Nous sommes utilisées selon nos **compétences** dans nos manifestations et organisations...mais c'est un militantisme sain qui n'a de récompense que la **satisfaction** intérieure.<sup>46</sup>

No, I am not afraid of ideological struggle, but in a political party it is rare for a woman to make an easy break-through... We are given tasks according to our abilities in our activities and organizations...but it is a healthy militancy whose only reward is inner satisfaction.<sup>47</sup>

In Modupé Bodé-Thomas's translation above, he chooses to retain the use of nouns where an adjectival alternative could have been employed, for example: 'We are given tasks according to how competent/able we are' or 'whose only reward is to be satisfied within.' Either of these alternative translations would have weakened the power and impact of Bâ's 'original' words. But the translation of the subjunctive is much more complex.

In *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet comment on the simplicity of rendering the subjunctive in English, but also the

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<sup>46</sup> Bâ, p. 137.

<sup>47</sup> Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, trans. by Modupé Bodé-Thomas (Oxford: Heinemann, 1981), p. 74.

problems of communicating the nuances of the subjunctive in translation from French.<sup>48</sup> In this case, ‘il est rare que la femme ait la percée facile’ is translated as ‘it is rare for a woman to make an easy break-through,’ but the nuance of ‘ait’ has not been entirely rendered in translation. Instead the translation could read: ‘it is rare that a woman might make an easy breakthrough,’ but what the translator may gain in nuance here, she may lose on fluency. Interestingly in the paragraph above, which is a speech by Ramatoulaye’s daughter Daba, the first person ‘I’ form does not have a patient bearing at all, perhaps because she is seen to be of the new liberated generation of Senegalese women in the book, confirming Steiner’s statement.

On the other hand, the following extract from ‘Mirage’ by Ndèye Coumba Mbengue Diakhate exemplifies the patient nature of the first person, also found in other examples of Senegalese literature:

J’ai frôlé, yeux fermés,  
 Le chemin constellé.  
 J’ai vogué dans les cieux,  
 Le merveilleux des Dieux,  
 Délices inespérés.....<sup>49</sup>

1)  
 I skimmed, eyes closed  
 The spangled way  
 I sailed the skies,  
 The marvel of Gods,  
 Unexpected delights....

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<sup>48</sup> Jean-Paul Vinay, and Jean Darbelnet, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l’anglais*. Rev. ed. (Paris: Didier, 1977), p. 144.

<sup>49</sup> Ndèye Coumba Mbengue Diakhate, *Filles du soleil* (Dakar: NEA, 1980), p. 17.

2)

I stroked, eyes closed

The starry way

I wandered the skies

The marvel of Gods

Unexpected delights...

3)

Closed eyes

I wandered the skies

I traced the starry way

Treasure of the Deity

Unexpected pleasure...

It is not so much the 'I' which is distinct in this poem, but the verb that follows it. Firstly, 'frôler' means to brush against or touch lightly. It conveys a certain gentleness and uncertainty. In translation one, 'skimmed' is correct but it is too impatient and definite, whereas 'stroked' in version two, or better still 'traced' in adaptation three communicates the softer nature of the French verb. Then, 'voguer' can mean 'sail,' but it is also a literary verb meaning 'float,' 'wander' or 'drift,' especially when speaking of someone's thoughts. Translation one, although correct, does not take this into account, whereas two and three convey the serene quality of the French poem and in that way embody Steiner's understanding of the patient nature of the female first person. 'Le merveilleux,' meaning 'the supernatural' in its noun form is also significant as both French and English use the word more frequently in its adjectival form to mean marvellous, wonderful or fantastic. The noun has been retained in translation as this has been underlined by Steiner as a key characteristic

of female language. Further, translation three attempts to replicate the sounds of the French poem by manipulating structures and finding alternative words so that style and meaning are balanced in translation. Hence, ‘women’s language’ in some form or other does exist; the examples above demonstrate that it is possible to pinpoint features of this language, and this process of analysis may assist the translator who wishes to embrace all features of the source text in her rewriting of Senegalese works in the English language.

It is interesting here to note how changing views on translation or requirements of translation from French into English may significantly alter a text in translation, because a need to replicate a wider diversity of source text features may favour strategies that depart from more ‘semantic’ methods for literary translation and instead could be defined as ‘adaptation,’ more common to theatre translation than poetry or standard prose. As this body of literature grows, so will the field of Translation Studies, a discipline that is constantly developing, is unrestrictive and allows the translator to go beyond basic theories to develop new methodologies and concepts. And as it does so, and translators are always freshly informed, perspectives may change, and so, therefore, may translations. The best works of poetry and prose have been translated many times over, for there is no strict right and wrong in literary translation. And the development of the discipline in this manner is vital for the survival over time and beyond the nation’s borders, of the literature of a fast-developing country such as Senegal. Hence, this research goes beyond theory.

Babacar Thioune also examines a number of distinctive areas in Senegalese women’s writing. For example, he notes the juxtaposition of women’s writing in particular to the oral form<sup>50</sup> and the way in which Senegalese women adhere to social realities.<sup>51</sup> He claims that men and women write about the same subjects, but their perspectives on the world are

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<sup>50</sup> Babacar Thioune, ‘L’exploration de l’écriture féminine au Sénégal: La tentation autobiographique’ (unpublished PhD thesis, U. de Paris Sorbonne, Paris IV, 1987), p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Thioune, p. 226.

different. Further, in *L'écriture-femme*, Béatrice Didier claims that women 'n'avaient jamais écrit exactement comme les hommes; si elles utilisaient le même langage, elles l'utilisaient autrement; souvent plus librement.'<sup>52</sup> And like Thioune, she also comments on the oral basis of women's language, a fact which has often been a reason for its rejection.<sup>53</sup> Finally, Thioune notes the often cited autobiographical form and the importance of the first person in women's discourse. So issues of voice, especially when the text is in the first person (singular or plural), are powerful in African women's literature and can be transferred into the target text as key characteristics of the poetry or prose in question.

Nevertheless, to make the issue more complex, Thioune says that some women write like men and vice versa,<sup>54</sup> and Didier states that great writers attempt to break away from the language and stereotypes of their time,<sup>55</sup> as did the aforementioned George Eliot. This supports the argument that young writers such as Seck Mbacké and Benga write in a more androgynous way. The fact is that women's writing is varied and there are exceptions to the patterns stated. It is important to consider all these elements but with no presumptions. The conscientious translator can analyse the text to ascertain as to whether the language demonstrates characteristics such as that of 'qualified resolve' or 'masked promise,' a 'vibrato' due to subjunctive use, strong adjectives or a particular 'richness,' especially on subjects of love and family. The translator must also be aware of women's closeness to orality, use of the first person, their adherence to social realities as well as their unique perspective on the world.

What is evident is that the translator should be the most thorough reader a text can have, one that delves into every aspect of the literature under consideration, including questioning the notion of 'voice' and whether that can be defined by gender or cultural

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<sup>52</sup> Béatrice Didier, *L'écriture-femme* (Vendôme: PU. de France, 1981), p. 30.

<sup>53</sup> Didier, p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> Thioune, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Didier, p. 31.

milieu. In other words, not only should the translator be looking at the French a text has been written in, but also at the position of that piece of literature within the Francosphere as a whole. It has been ascertained that it may not be possible to describe women's language use in Senegal definitively, for there are perhaps some writers who, deliberately or otherwise, do not follow standard patterns. However, there are some characteristics that the translator can search for when analysing the text for rewriting in the English language, and the translator of Senegalese literature who wishes to adhere to the more intricate qualities of a text and replicate the nuances of 'female language' in translation, must take great care in the decision-making process between different words and phrases. Translation Studies scholar, Sherry Simon asserts that translation:

...oblige us to ask with each proper name, with each cultural reference, with each stylistic trait, with each idiomatic expression, with each swear word: how similar is this reality to its possible replacement in another language?...how different? When do differences climb from the trivial to the substantial? <sup>56</sup>

Gendered vocabulary adds a new dimension to this, as an integral part of many of the writers' identities as well as the characters they develop.

If the Francosphere is engaging with the 'fringes' of the discipline of Francophone postcolonial studies, the translation of gendered language most certainly sits on its periphery, but being non-central does not make the issues raised here any less important. The increasing demand for translated Francophone texts, the movement of literature across borders, the growing need to provide English language translations, and pressure from readers to supply what they consider to be 'authentic' translations (ones that divert as little as possible from the

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<sup>56</sup> Sherry Simon, *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2006), p.24.



source text and culture and highlight difference, foreignness and diversity), mean that the challenge to replicate all possible layers of meaning of a source text has become more urgent than ever to the literary translator. It is also clear from this study that the periphery of the Francosphere marks its merging with other disciplines, where Francophone Postcolonial scholars engage increasingly with translations and Translation Studies theorists connect more frequently with the postcolonial world, and where theory and practice become mutually enhancing. So, just as the postcolonial writer and the translator mediate between two or more cultures, the translator of Senegalese women's literature must negotiate between disciplines in order to establish the most effective methodology for translation.

Of course, as highlighted earlier, translation decisions depend upon the *skopos* and strategy of the translator. However, if the translator aims to consider the many different interpretations of a text and render as fully as possible all layers of meaning, then names, cultural references, stylistic traits, idioms and each and every word carry with them a social reality for which the translator can endeavour to find the nearest possible word of 'equivalence.'<sup>57</sup> Differences may exist between cultures and languages, but the way they are communicated can be better understood if the translator explores the cultural relevance of the word in question. And that includes the powerful nature of gendered vocabulary in embodying women's realities, as well as an understanding of the education and background that has led the writer to the point at which she puts pen to page. What is also interesting is the future of research such as this. There is clearly a need for further engagement with these literary works and in many cases full translations, in order that they do not simply become lost in the growing number of published texts worldwide.

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<sup>57</sup> Although a well-debated term, here the notion of 'equivalence' is not used to imply the superiority of the source text, but just the inevitable relationship between it and the target text.

It should be noted that, with the increasing emancipation of women in Senegal,<sup>58</sup> the body of Francophone Senegalese women's works is bound to extend even more rapidly than ever as traditional roles become less restrictive. Women may begin to take bigger linguistic risks in prose and poetry, and it will be interesting to see how some of the third generation writers develop, empowered further through literature and by means of translation. And as the effects of colonisation become more distant memories, a fourth generation of writers will emerge as a growing number of women receive increasingly higher levels of education. These women will have new focuses, different objectives and perhaps will be influenced even more by the effects of globalisation and travel, and even less by issues of gender. And whilst the English language is little used in Senegal at present, this could possibly change, and will pose interesting dilemmas for the translator working within and beyond the Francosphere.

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<sup>58</sup> Mbow, p. 3.

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