

TRANSLATION AS DELINKING FROM COLONIAL NARRATIVES: OKSANA ZABUZHKO'S FICTION IN ENGLISH

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Abstract. *The present article aims to examine the transformative potential of translation, specifically Oksana Zabuzhko's English-translated fiction, as a tool for disentangling from colonial narratives, influenced by Russian cultural hegemony in the West. The primary focus is on delineating how the translation of Ukrainian postcolonial fiction into English serves the dual purpose of breaking away (delinking) from these colonial perspectives, and cultivating epistemic humility and intellectual empathy among Anglophone readership. The paper also seeks to underscore the agency and positionality of English translators (Halyna Hryn and Nina Shevchuk-Murray) handling Zabuzhko's texts, focusing on their role in communicating the decolonial motif in the translated novels, thus challenging prevailing hegemonic structures through their creative practices. The research is based on a close reading of the English translation of Oksana Zabuzhko's novel "Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex," released in the USA in 2011, and "The Museum of Abandoned Secrets", published the following year; in 2012 – both books were part of the renowned world literature in translation project, Amazon Crossing. The study argues, through a series of illustrative examples, that despite inevitable ideological losses, translators adeptly employed both assimilative and signaling techniques, facilitating an in-depth comprehension of Zabuzhko's deconstructive logic. Expansion is employed as a translational technique when addressing cultural and historical descriptions, linguoculturemes, and allusions, while an interesting contrast is at times observed with the omission strategy applied to units of a similar nature, which represents a loss through the lens of decolonial critique. The paper initiates an important discussion on the potential synergy between translation studies and ongoing research in Slavic studies from a decolonial perspective.*

Key words: *decoloniality, decolonization, Ukrainian fiction, Anglophone translation, Oksana Zabuzhko, translatorial strategy, adaptation, translation history, reception.*

ПЕРЕКЛАД ЯК ВІДМЕЖУВАННЯ ВІД КОЛОНІАЛЬНИХ НАРАТИВІВ: ХУДОЖНЯ ПРОЗА ОКСАНИ ЗАБУЖКО АНГЛІЙСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ

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Анотація. Запропонована стаття має на меті дослідити трансформаційний потенціал перекладу, зокрема англomовних перекладів художньої прози Оксани Забужко, як інструменту звільнення від та деконструкції колоніальних наративів, спричинених російською культурною гегемонією на Заході. Основну увагу зосереджено на визначенні того, як переклад української постколоніальної художньої літератури англійською мовою стратегічно відіграє подвійну роль: передусім, це – створення простору відмежування від російського імперіального літературного дискурсу в англomовному світі, а також формування епістемічного смирення та інтелектуальної емпатії серед англomовної читацької аудиторії. У статті також зроблено спробу окреслити позиціонування та концепцію англійських перекладачок (Галини Гринь і Ніни Шевчук-Мюррей), які працюють з текстами Забужко, зосереджуючись на їхній ролі в проєкції деколоніальних мотивів у перекладених романах, які кидають виклик панівним наративним структурам у своїх творчих практиках. Дослідження ґрунтується на комплексному аналізі англійського перекладу роману Оксани Забужко “Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex”, що вийшов у США у 2011 році, та “The Museum of Abandoned Secrets”, опублікованого наступного, 2012 року. Обидві книги стали частиною відомого проєкту світової літератури в перекладі Amazon Crossing. У дослідженні на низці ілюстративних прикладів доведено, що, незважаючи на неминучі ідеологічні втрати, перекладачі вміло використовували асимілятивні та сигнальні техніки в інтерпретації, що сприяло поглибленому розумінню деконструктивної логіки текстів Забужко. Прослідковано, що перекладачі використовують експансію як техніку в роботі з культурно-історичними вставками, лінгвокультурами та алузіями, тоді як іноді спостерігається цікавий контраст з актуалізацією методу опущення, що застосовано до подібних за форматом культурно маркованих одиниць, відповідно це втрата з погляду деколоніальної критики. Ця праця також розпочинає важливу фахову дискусію щодо потенційної синергії між перекладознавством й останніми дослідженнями в галузі славістики через призму деколоніальної оптики.

Ключові слова: деколоніальність, деколонізація, українська проза, англomовний переклад, Оксана Забужко, стратегія перекладача, адаптація, історія перекладу, рецепція.

Problem statement. As one of the fastest-growing debates in the humanities revolves around the decolonial turn (from pioneering works by Franz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Anibal Quijano, Abraham T. Tobi to recent contributions by Walter Mignolo and Catherine Welsh), it becomes imperative to reassess the field of Slavic literatures by advancing the practice of de-centering the outsized Russian imperial perspective and foregrounding “other” epistemic viewpoints, previously treated quite simplistically as “zones of non-being” (as aptly put by Franz Fanon [3]). Claire Gallien states that “the decolonial turn is not about augment-

ing and elevating Western episteme with new content”, rather it is about “clearing the space for other epistemologies to circulate” [4]. In this line of reasoning, Veli Mitova refers to the decoloniality of knowledge as the processual necessity to *undo* one way of thinking about knowledge and to *reconstruct* it by learning anew and in new ways rather than those imposed on people and institutions [6]. Given this, the process of decoloniality, according to Ngũgĩ, necessitates the recognition of the intrinsic value of diverse languages and their profound influence on knowledge systems [7]. Thus, it is translation as an interlingual and intercultural act

that becomes a centerpiece of decolonial practices, enabling delinking from imposed structures of knowledge, reconstitution of marginalized perspectives and development of *epistemic humility*, described by Alistair Wardrope as “an attitude of awareness of the limitations of one’s own epistemic capacities, and an active disposition to seek sources outside one’s self to help overcome these shortcomings” [11].

In this context, the translation of Ukrainian literature into English gains strategic importance in legitimizing the epistemic viewpoints of Ukraine (both as an independent state and as an ex-colonized site) and deconstructing the lingering presence of Russian colonial matrices of power in global cultural space, specifically pointing to the Russian coloniality as a still prevalent epistemological design. The English language was characterized by George Steiner as an indispensable “window on the world” for writers, emphasizing that going untranslated, particularly into English, poses the risk of fading into obscurity: “They must be translated if their works, if their lives, are to have a fair chance of coming into the light” [10]. While Steiner’s emphasis does prompt inquiries regarding the cultural dominance of English, Ukrainian-to-English translation without the pivot of Russian implies distancing and delinking from the former networks of colonial influence and reconstitution of Ukrainian own literary identity.

Oksana Zabuzhko, a highly influential contemporary Ukrainian female writer, has contributed significantly to the literary aesthetics of post-independent Ukraine through her formative novels. Her fiction reveals that postcolonial history transcends “a mere documented factual canvas or a glamorous story”, evolving into a nuanced exploration of “internal existential knowledge” [5, p. 134] Zabuzhko’s role is hence pivotal in what can be termed as the “translation canon” of contemporary Ukrainian literature, a body of work that not only articulates the entangled concept of *Ukrainianness* but also forms a transformative discourse about Ukraine when translated into foreign languages. Moreover, she presently occupies a prominent position as a proponent of decolonizing methodologies in the interpretation of Russian literary classics, as evidenced by her article “No guilty people in the world? Reading Russian literature after the Bucha massacre”, which was published in April 2022 in the Times Literary Supplement.

Purpose of the article. The present paper seeks to explore the role of translation, particularly in the context of Oksana Zabuzhko’s fiction translated into English, as a means of disengaging from colonial narratives. The focus is on how the act of English-language translation of Ukrainian postcolonial fiction contributes both to breaking away (delinking) from colonial perspectives often perpetuated by Russian cultural influence in the West, as well as to fostering epistemic humility and intellectual empathy. The paper also aims to highlight the agency and positionality of English translators of Zabuzhko’s texts, elucidating their role in conveying the decolonial motif and rendering it perceptible and understandable within the translated novels, thereby challenging hegemonic structures through their creative practices.

Presentation of the main material. Zabuzhko’s first novel, “Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex,” published in 1996 [14], was met with significant controversy among both Ukrainian critics and readers. This was primarily due to the narrator expressing dissatisfaction with the established order of relationships between sexes. In her narrative, a woman is portrayed as subjected to oppression – social and sexual – by both traditional patriarchy and totalitarianism, addressing her as a gendered subject. Uilleam Blacker, in his article on gender and national identity in the works of Oksana Zabuzhko, notes that “Zabuzhko sees national identity not as something confined to public political and cultural debates but as being inscribed in the intimate, private spaces of the home and the body” [1]. The novel unearthed the loneliness and marginality of a creative, intellectual woman within her society, emphasizing the challenges of being unheard or undervalued. Despite the controversy, and also due to the fact that the novel does shed light on the repressive Soviet past and the enduring national traumas, it was recognized as *The Most Influential Book for the 15 Years Of Ukraine’s Independence* according to a poll conducted by the Elit-profile agency in August 2006.

Oksana Zabuzhko’s second novel, “The Museum of Abandoned Secrets”, was published in Ukraine in 2009 [13]. It won major domestic awards such as *The Best Ukrainian Book Award* in 2010, as well as the *BBC Book of the Year* (2010) and *Angelus Central European Literary Award* in 2013. The novel deals with Ukraine’s resistance and opposition to the Soviet colonial

regime in the 20th century. It presents the reality of the relations between the countries that within the structure of the USSR were seen by the West only in the context of the myth of the “friendships of nations”, the myth that Putin’s Russia still perpetuates. The events of the novel cover the lives of three generations, sixty years of development of Ukrainian history, the period from the beginning of autumn 1943 to the spring of 2004. It depicts the era of Stalin’s controversial policies, the era of the Sixties generation and the period of independence, perestroika and the conflictual 1990s.

The English translation of Oksana Zabuzhko’s novel “Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex” was first released in the USA in 2011, and “The Museum of Abandoned Secrets” was published the next year – in 2012. The books came out in a well-known project of the world literature in translation *Amazon Crossing* launched by Amazon Publishing, a leading trade publisher of fiction, nonfiction, and children’s books. The translation of “The Museum of Abandoned Secrets” was brought out three years after the Ukrainian publication of the book (2009), and that of “Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex” had to await its publication in English for much longer – 15 years (first released in 1996 in Ukraine). When Halyna Hryn started working upon her rendition of “Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex” into English, she first published its translated excerpt in the online journal *AGNI* back in 2001.

Recalling the cooperation with the English translators, Oksana Zabuzhko tells in the interview for *Glebov* translation bureau in Kyiv that it is very important that both Nina and Halyna speak Ukrainian as their mother tongue and are truly gifted with an excellent literary taste. “We needed ‘adaptation-authorization’ period,” Zabuzhko commented, saying that for instance, she carefully read the first two chapters of the translated “Museum of Abandoned Secrets” so as to clarify for Nina Shevchuk-Murray “what actually the author wanted to say” [26]. Ultimately, the translations received wide critical acclaim, as evidenced by positive reviews [2; 8; 9]. Translators managed to “retain the original’s linguistic specificity without losing any of Zabuzhko’s sharp-witted dynamism” [2] and “mirror authorial streams of consciousness” [8] by writing lengthy complex paragraphs. Although British readers expressed concerns about the prevalence of Americanisms, Oksana Zabuzhko asserts that

the decision to use US-oriented English translations in both cases was intentional, as American English has become increasingly predominant worldwide. Importantly to note, Halyna Hryn, as well as Nina Shevchuk-Murray, provided neither footnotes nor a glossary in their editions, yet there seem to be several cases when explanations would benefit the readers who are not familiar with the cultural or historical context of Ukraine.

For instance, in her review on Hryn’s translation, Maryna Romanets describes ideological losses in translation when it was opted to use vocabulary more recognizable to English-language readers: “When Zabuzhko talks about the distinctly Ukrainian type of female beauty, she refers to Cossack Baroque portraits and laments, “*ех, була колись Гетьманщина, а тепер пропала!*”, which is reproduced in Hryn’s translation as “*those were the days, now gone for sure!*”. The only remaining marker of historical contextualization featured in this passage in English is the word “Cossack,” which generally might evoke associations with military or semi-military communities, such as the Ukrainian Zaporozhian Sich or even the Don Cossack Host, which was allied with Muscovy. Moreover, Zabuzhko’s use of *Het’manshchyna* (Hetmanate or Hetman State, 1648–1782) clearly points to the period of the Ukrainian unitary state whose autonomy was progressively destroyed during the reign of Catherine II of Russia (1762–96)” [9]. The described case of erasure of historical allusion to the glorious epoch of Ukrainian Hetmanate aligns with a decolonial critique, underscoring the importance of preserving and accurately conveying the nuanced historical and cultural contexts embedded in the source text, even if they may be less familiar to the target audience.

In this regard, Halyna Hryn exhibits a combination of assimilative and transformative approaches in reinterpreting Zabuzhko’s distinctive fusion of intricate style, enriched with scholarly and, at times, outdated lexicon, as well as colonial intertexts. As an example, Oksana Zabuzhko creates an allusion to the historical fact, when Joseph Stalin praised one of Maxim Gorky’s first pieces, which was of rather mediocre quality, and Halyna Hryn actualizes this ironic remark in her translation: “<...> бо навіть якби ти, якимось дивом, устругнула в цій мові що-небудь “*посильнее “Фауста” Гете*”, як висловлювався **один знаний в історії**

літературний критик, то воно просто провакувалось би по бібліотеках нечитане <...>” – “<...> because even if you did, by some miracle, produce something in this language “knocking out Goethe’s Faust,” as **one well-known literary critic by the name of Joseph Stalin** would put it, then it would only lie around the libraries unread <...>”. Specifically, Zabuzhko resorts to ironical antonomasia making use of the descriptive expression “*один знаний в історії літературний критик*” instead of Stalin’s name. The translator brings the name back, which, on the one hand, sheds some light upon the situation depicted, though without much detail but the structure “*by the name of*” adds the ironical decolonial attitude, and, on the other hand, it does not ruin the expressivity of an utterance.

Similarly, when Oksana Zabuzhko incorporates allusions to Ukrainian authors in “The Museum of Abandoned Secrets”, Nina Shevchuk-Murray opts for expansion, transforming, for instance, the allusion into a mere citation by explicitly mentioning the name of the Ukrainian poet – Yevhen Pluzhnyk: “<...> уникаючи дивитися на щасливого, п’яного розгубленого Артема, що недоречно п’рвався був проявляти ніжність, котра, як відомо, народжується по той бік пристрасти” [13] – “<...> who felt the urge to show some un-called-for tenderness, which, **as the poet Pluzhnyk once said**, “is born on the far side of passion” [15]. It serves as a decolonial intervention in the target texts, foregrounding the significance of the cultural reference to the “voice” of the Ukrainian writer within the translated narrative. In a comparable instance within the novel “Fieldwork of the Ukrainian Sex”, Halyna Hryn decided not to add any comments or descriptions to explicate allusions to Ukrainian literature: “<...> з отерпом у пучках і сльозами в очу ти читала надісланий тобі тут, в Америці, переклад “Лісової пісні”, авторизовану версію, призначену для бродвейської сцени, кайфувала, як наркоман, од її прискореного жагучого віддиху: живе! живе, не пропало!” [14] – “<...> with numb fingertips and tears in your eyes you had read **a translation of Forest Song done here in America, an authorized version meant for the Broadway stage, you were as high as a kite from your quickened, passionate breathing: it’s alive, alive, it hasn’t perished!**” [12].

It is thus evident that Nina Shevchuk-Murray consistently adopts a descriptive mode in her translation, elucidating additional context for Ukrainian “intertexts” from a decolonial perspective. The following particular case exemplifies her strategic use of descriptive elements, as she introduces an augmentation to depict Zabuzhko’s manner of playing with Russian words: “*Несознательной... – підказує всміхаючись інтерв’юерка*” [14] – “**No class consciousness, the interviewer pipes in with the vintage Communist-speak**” [15]. The preservation of the Soviet flavor in translation is deemed significant as the Russian language integrated into Zabuzhko’s narration often carries explicit connotations of the Soviet era and is intricately linked to the ideology of the Communist party, a feature that the translator duly maintains in her rendition.

Such brief elements of intertextual character unearth an ice-berg of colonial tensions and traumas, which is imperative for preservation in target versions. As an example, Uilleam Blacker also noticed that the heroine, through observing the physical toll inflicted by the breakup on her own body, contemplates a sensation reminiscent of Soviet prison camps: “a feeling familiar perhaps to prisoners of the Gulag” [2]. This intertwining of memories from the love affair with allusions to Ukraine’s fraught history underscores the embodiment of colonial violence and political repression within the characters, illuminating the profound resonance between personal and collective narratives.

On the other hand, both translators strived to make their renditions appropriate in the context of Anglophone culture. To illustrate, let us consider this example: “(а які кумедні ці капелюшки з двадцятих років уже минулого століття, такі обтислі, насажені по самі брови банячки, обперізані шовковими биндами, <...>” [14] – “**How comical these cloche hats from the Jazz Age of the already-past century: these tightly fitted little felt pots, pulled down to just above the eyebrows and banded with silk <...>**” [15]. Ukrainians associate the late 1920s with Bolshevik conquest, enslavement, and malevolent experiments, while the US recalls it as the Jazz Age, marked by the rise of jazz music and dance styles after World War I. F. Scott Fitzgerald coined the term “the Jazz Age”, capturing the post-war period’s unrestrained hilarity. The US embraced the era’s

fashion, including cloche hats, named in France in the late 1900s. In American culture, the 1920s have a distinct name, and cloche hats were popular among women. Nina Shevchuk-Murray employs particularization, using specific English equivalents to evoke the original text's concepts for the target reader.

Conclusions and prospects for further development. The present study initiates the discussion on how the dynamics of English translations of Ukrainian literature contribute to decolonial revisiting and global repositioning of Ukraine's cultural identity. On the example of Zabuzhko's fiction, it is exemplified that translators can simultaneously adopt assimilative and signaling techniques, enabling readers to smoothly process the deconstructive logic of the narrative. Hryn's and Murray's translations showcase how

the deliberate preservation of brief allusions and intertexts in translation becomes a vital mechanism for actualizing the decolonial perspective embedded in the narrative, as it facilitates engagement with cultural and historical nuances essential for a comprehensive understanding of the text's underlying themes. Expansion has been often utilized by Murray as a translational strategy in handling marked allusions. Interestingly, a contrasting approach is occasionally evident with the omission strategy applied by Hryn to units of a similar nature, resulting in a loss from the standpoint of decolonial critique.

In general, the present paper sets the stage for new discussions on the potential synergy between translation studies and the ongoing research in Slavic studies, particularly from a decolonial perspective.

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