

“THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY”: TRANSLATION AS A MEANS OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT: When a young black reader believes all literature characters are white and blue-eyed, we are faced with one of the manifestations of the hegemony of certain countries or languages, materialized in their literary productions. Taking Adichie’s (2009) “single story” ideology as a starting point, this article intends to highlight the role of literary translation as a social practice, which can play a crucial role in the current political economy of fight against this inequality, especially in its relations with minority cultures. In this sense, the concepts of domestication and foreignization in translation, proposed by Venuti (1995), as alternative to the translator’s invisibility issue, as well as to Anglo-American cultural hegemony come to meet the fear of a “cultural homogenization” (HALL, 1997) or a “single story” in books. Through the use of specific methods, translation stands as a form of resistance, advocating from a perspective of the ethics of difference, encouraging the flowering of stories yet little known.

KEYWORDS: Translation. Translator’s invisibility. Literature. Identity.

RESUMO: Quando um jovem leitor negro acredita que todos os personagens literários são brancos de olhos azuis, nos deparamos com uma das manifestações da hegemonia de certos países ou línguas, materializadas em suas produções literárias. Tomando a ideologia da “história única” de Adichie (2009) como ponto de partida, este artigo objetiva sublinhar o papel da tradução literária enquanto prática social, que pode desempenhar um papel crucial na atual economia política de luta contra essa desigualdade, sobretudo em sua relação com culturas minoritárias. Nesse sentido, os conceitos de tradução domesticadora e estrangeirizadora propostos por Venuti (1995) como alternativa à problemática da invisibilidade do tradutor e à hegemonia cultural anglo-americana vêm ao encontro do receio de se ter uma “homogeneização cultural” (HALL, 1997) ou uma “história única” nos livros. A partir da adoção de determinados métodos, a tradução se coloca como forma de resistência, advogando numa perspectiva da ética da diferença, incentivando o florescimento de histórias até então pouco conhecidas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Tradução. Invisibilidade do tradutor. Literatura. Identidade.

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Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, born in 1977, is a Nigerian writer, whose books had already been translated to thirty languages. Considered one of the most relevant Anglophone young writers, she has called the attention of young generations to African literature. She is the author of *Purple Hibiscus*, her first novel, published in 2003 and awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in 2005; and *Half of a yellow sun*, her second novel, published in 2006, which was awarded the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 2007. In April 2017, Adichie was announced as elected into the 237th class of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, considered one of the most honorable positions for intellectuals in the United States. During a speech, in 2009, promoted by TED³ organization, Adichie talks about her early experience with literature. Her mother would offer her American or British children's books which, according to Adichie, would bring white, blue-eyed characters who ate apples. Apparently, there seems to be no problem in being introduced to books by a literature with such traits. Perhaps, if we recollected the first books we were introduced to, we would get to the same conclusion as Adichie – characters and actions might have been similar to the ones she described. The greatest inconvenient is when this is the only literature we are offered to, by parents, school or the book market itself. It is difficult to notice, but it is a real proof of language centrality on developing and obliterating hegemonies. The soft issue emerges when one starts to believe certain characters, actions, stories, represent the whole. Furthermore, taking certain stories, actions and characters as guidelines for future works is even more disturbing. That is the reason why the Nigerian writer, as she joined the book world as a writer herself, started to portrait characters and

³ TED is a non-governmental organization found in 1984 as the premiere of a conference involving researchers and interested people in the fields of technology, entertainment and design (TED). Since then, the repercussion of its speeches has only increased. Personalities, writers and researchers expose their ideas in several areas that consider the social as a whole encompassing the three domains that take the event's name. The purpose of the speeches is to bring innovative perspectives and debates on various issues that demand attention.

actions just like the ones she had found in those books she had first read: white, blue-eyed, that played in the snow and had the habit of talking about the weather, particularly when it was sunny. Regardless of the fact that Adichie had never left Nigeria at that time, and that her countrymen were black, brown-eyed people who ate mangoes (instead of apples), who did not play in the snow and did not talk about the pleasant sunny weather – for being completely unnecessary in a country with predominantly warm and dry days –, her works were trying to correspond to those patterns she had been exposed to. After all, it is really difficult to do something different from what we were used to. Breaking molds requires effort. It is this story that Adichie calls “the single story” and that she decided to defy, using her writing.

Taking this “single story” ideology as a starting point, this article intends to highlight the role of translation as a social practice, playing a crucial role in the current political economy of fight against this inequality, especially in its relations with minority cultures. In order to reach its purpose, it first presents what Adichie calls “the danger of the single story”. The second section is dedicated to a discussion on the book market and the final section to the transformative power of translation.

Single stories and their power to reinforce minority cultures

The writer’s account serves as an eye opening to show us how easily we can be impressed and influenced by stories, especially when one is young and the first contacts with books happen – and can leave significant impressions. One of the impressions left in Adichie was the (false) premise that book characters must be foreigners, considering that the characters from the books she had read were foreigners; that the narratives must be about things she did not identify with, since the literature she had read had brought identity traits strange from hers. In short, that literature had nothing she could identify with, for it was completely unrelated to her daily life and life in Africa, as if it belonged to Europeans.

The paradigm shift came when the Nigerian writer happened to meet African books, which were rare and difficult to be found (compared to foreign books). It was through this contact with African authors that Adichie realized that “characters with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails could also exist in

literature”. That was when she began to write about familiar things, with which she could relate. Although Adichie nurtured great appreciation for American and British literatures – for they fed her imagination and showed her new worlds –, these same literatures restrained her from believing characters just like her could also exist in books. That is why the writer credits her liberation from what she calls “the danger of a single story” to African works.

“The danger of a single story” is represented in various situations. At university, in The United States, when Adichie’s roommate, an American, was taken aback by her English fluency – without having the slightest idea that English was one of Nigeria’s official language. When this same roommate asked Adichie to sing her tribal music – without having the slightest idea that the Nigerian came from a conventional middle-class family consisting of a professor and an administrator. When many people refer to Africa as a *country*, whose story boils down to “beautiful landscapes and beautiful animals, incomprehensible people fighting illogical wars, catastrophes, people dying of hunger and AIDS, incapable of speaking for themselves, waiting for some generous white foreigner who will save them” (ADICHIE, 2009). When many people believe that living in Brazil means being in the middle of the jungle, surrounded by monkeys and other wild animals. When your Polish friend, before moving to Brazil, is told to be aware of snakes, because they are simply everywhere.

All of them are single stories, or the stereotypes, that are all around and can gain more space through their dissemination in the most different ways, including (or maybe especially?) the books. When it comes to the editorial market, we face a particular reality: the existence of a “power geometry” (HALL 1997, p.4) also operating on editorial practices and outlining hierarchies. These hierarchies, on the other hand, regulate which books get into and out of a country, what is to be offered to the various reader profiles (children, adults, popular, intellectual, academic, etc.), the way books and authors are advertised, etc. They are small gears that constitute the publishing market and work according to socioeconomic, cultural and political aspects. This has an impact on which books might get translated and which might not get translated, that is, offered to the reader. The book market hides complex power relations which result, most of the times, in the reinforcement of disparities between central and peripheral cultures/languages.

This scenario urges for social transformation towards an ethics of the difference, which involves perceiving the importance of translation and the translator's voice in this contemporary scenario as part of this complex cultural system.

The book market battle field

Bourdieu exploits the complexity of these relations from what he names *literary field*, which unfolds in *field(s)*, *capital (economic and symbolic)*, *cycles of production (short and long)*, among other elements. This notion of literary field can be related to what Even-Zohar (1990) calls the “polysystem” consisting of *institution*, *repertoire* and other components, all interconnected and, because of this, influencing one another, topic widely discussed in his Polysystem Theory.

The fundamental questions of this theory surround the motivation within the trades between certain goods and systems. According to Even-Zohar, the imposition, by the polysystem, of limitations and pressures on the ways of selecting, manipulating, amplifying and excluding observed in their goods would be evident (EVEN-ZOHAR, 1990). Taking into account that certain texts belong to the canon whereas others belong to the margins, territories of tension between more central and more peripheral positions rise.

These recognition disputes take place in a field called “The World Republic of Letters” (CASANOVA, 2002), where the exchange money is literary capital, that is, each writer's particular value. The more canonical his or her name is, the greater his or her capital will be. This value depends not only on the power of one's name, but also on the power of language, an important element that also holds literary capital, derived from its political and economic power. In the case of Portuguese language, for instance, although it is the sixth most widely spoken language (in number of speakers), the number of speakers is not enough to legitimize hierarchy between central and peripheral languages (SONCELLA, 2012). The more peripheral position of our language ends up becoming a barrier to the diffusion of our works worldwide. And due to the low symbolic capital acquired (as a so-called literary language), the country has limited autonomy in the global literary scene, which hinders its international projection. It is a cycle in which one aspect feeds the other. Breaking this flow becomes a challenge.

In the translation context, it is clear that “economic factors are decisive in determining the number of works translated [...], as well as which nations will receive them” (ESTEVES 2016). We can add that economic factors also determine which titles and authors will be exported. After all, few publishers are interested in publishing writers with little or no (yet) recognition, with low status/symbolic capital. Publishers, as commercial establishments they are, worry about generating income to make their businesses last, and end up prioritizing publications of writers capable of being easily sold. If an author does not hold a (good) position in the literary field, he or she does not exist or is invisible. The search for a (good) position can be achieved, among other ways, through promotions and marketing strategies, which are often derisory when compared to efforts made to promote foreign writers, especially acclaimed American and British ones, for they hold a central position and are “sure sales” that ensure the so needed revenue. Here, then, is another complex cycle to break.

The literary capital (CASANOVA, 2002), which Bourdieu (1996) would call symbolic power and Even-Zohar (1990) would name centrality, is decisive in the book production process and in the economic logic of the editorial field. Bourdieu groups publishing houses into two categories according to the length of their production cycles: the commercial ones and the pure art ones. The so-called commercial enterprises present a short production cycle, for their products supply a pre-existing demand, follow pre-established forms and aim at “[...] minimizing risks by an early adjustment to detectable demand, and endowed with commercialization circuits and valuing procedures (publicity, public relations, etc.) to ensure fast profits by fast circulation of products meant for quick obsolescence” (BOURDIEU, 1996, p.163). The so-called pure art enterprises present a long production cycle, for they are based on “[...] accepting the inherent risks in cultural investments and above all in the submission to specific art trading laws: with no current market, this entirely future-oriented production tends to make stocks of products always on the verge of becoming material objects” (BOURDIEU, 1996, p. 163).

Publishing houses, therefore, are constantly evaluating authors’ and writers’ credit in order to secure their profits, for these people are valuable pieces in this game in which many cards seem to be marked. Equating tensions between quality and quantity (from a more marketing perspective) creates apprehension, because writers want to be recognized

for their literary qualities in a field where this quality is, as a rule, dictated by quantity. Short-cycled establishments often invest in authors who are consumed in large amounts and in short time, while long-cycled establishments prefer to bet on the ones who sell in smaller amounts, but for a longer time. Moreover, there is still the issue of the changes in the book market provoked by technology, which has made sales standards change.

Critics and the media, as opinion creators and disseminators, have the power to increase an author's value and "label" him as more suitable for short or long cycles. It is important to highlight that authors frequently perform different roles in the production process (FERES, 2016), for they have "access to power positions in consecration and legitimation instances [...] or in reproduction and legitimation instances" (BOURDIEU, 1996, p.175), that is, they can be considered as part of both the institution and the market (EVEN-ZOHAR, 1990). This kind of two-way relationship has the power to validate and consolidate authors and texts facilitating their access to more central positions in the literary polysystem.

The place a country holds in the "Republic of letters" is a result of the sum of its writers' recognition (and of some in particular), as well as their number of translations and value accredited by foreign media and critics. The Index Translationum, regardless its limitations, is an important available tool to measure a country's participation and position in the Republic. Again, the analysis of the numbers referring to translations' source language shows the absolute supremacy of English, which leads down-handed the second one, French. Needless to say, when we mention English we mean especially the USA and England. This hegemony, as we know, does not emerge only in editorial contexts. It is just one of the manifestations of its (English) economic, political, cultural and even military power and it should not be forgotten that language is power (BOURDIEU, 1983; RAJAGOPALAN, 1997; SPIVAK, 2000).

Translation as means of social transformation

It must be kept in mind that the translation process is an important piece of this intricate gear. The choice of books to be translated, the methodology/procedures used in translations, the amount of attention given to the translators and their work, the percentage reserved to authors, translators, publishing houses and how much it is paid for books also

depend on socioeconomic, cultural and political aspects. Concerning the translation process, the main issue in this paper, we can notice a disparity that, according to postcolonialist studies, would be largely due to a worldview lined off by binarities which are ordinary in colonization scopes (MELLO; VOLLET, 2000). Examples of these dichotomies are “civilized and wild”, “colonizer and colonized”, “superior culture/language” and “inferior culture/language” (MELLO; VOLLET, 2000, p.2). As we create meaning through notions taken as antagonists, a brutal classification that feeds relations of power that (also) involves translation is established. It is due to this inequality in power relations that we can see the predominance of certain languages in comparison to others. Striking evidence of this discrepancy is the fact that “the dominated culture translates the hegemonic culture incomparably more than the other way around” (MELLO; VOLLET, 2000, p.6). Other relevant data show us that

Books from the so called South countries represent 1% or 2% of the so called North countries’ translation market. The literature of these countries, however, is read on an absurdly larger scale. In 1997, based on the publications of large publishing houses, 60% of nonfiction works are translated from English, 26% of them are in Portuguese and 14% are translated from other languages. On the best-seller fiction list, we can find a proportion of two foreign authors for one national author. The result of this equation is that the developing of Southern countries’ language and culture are directly affected by Northern countries’ language and culture. (MELLO; VOLLET, 2000, p. 6)⁴

This inequality between hegemonic and non-hegemonic countries within the editorial scope is in line with Venuti’s theory (1995) that aims at amplifying the voice of minority groups through translation and specific translation methods and strategies. Venuti’s position is motivated by the “translator’s invisibility” concept, an idea closely connected to the Romanticism thought. At that time, the author’s authority and genius could enjoy great status. On the other hand, the translator and his work enjoyed mere

⁴ Translated by the authors. In the original: “As obras dos ditos países do sul representam 1% ou 2% do mercado das traduções dos países ditos do norte. A literatura desses países, no entanto, é lida em escala absurdamente maior. No ano de 1997, com base nos lançamentos de grandes editoras, 60% das publicações de ficção são traduções do inglês, 26% das obras em português e 14% traduções de outras línguas. Na lista dos mais vendidos em ficção, a proporção é de cerca de dois autores estrangeiros para um nacional. O resultado é que o desenvolvimento da cultura e língua dos países do hemisfério sul (países do Terceiro Mundo) é diretamente afetado pela língua e cultura dos países do norte (países do Primeiro Mundo)” (MELLO; VOLLET, 2000, p.6).

mechanic relevance and minimum value. In 1995, Venuti revisits German Schleiermacher's 1813 theory, whose thought was based on summarizing the translator's choice into two ways of performing his translation: either the translator would lead the author to his reader's culture, naturalizing the source text discourse so that it would be more in accordance with the target language discourse, smoothing its inherent differences; or the translator would lead the author to the reader, exposing him or her to the source language discourse in a non-naturalized way, that is, without minimizing the also inherent discrepancies between the two texts (source and target).

Venuti, long afterwards, is inspired by Schleiermacher's ideas to coin two alternatives he named "domesticating translation" and "foreignizing translation". The American theorist, however, revisited such concepts with the intention to discuss the "translator's invisibility" issue, a trait that had been highly demanded for a long time. For Venuti, the pressure (especially from the critics) for delivering a fluent translation, which would sound familiar to its reader, would be transparent, would not seem to be a translation, would show as a result the covering of the inherent interference in the foreign text performed by the translator. He, therefore, would disappear. The arduous and indispensable work within translated pages is completely neglected. The propulsive idea of Venuti's theory is based on the defense of a foreignizing translation method, which would not only be a tool to increase translators' recognition and, this way, getting to a better appreciation for their work. Above all, his arguments aim at fighting American and British (cultural and political) hegemony. For believing these cultures are in the highest level of the "geometry power" (HALL, 1997, p.4) and, therefore, consider themselves self-sufficient is that Venuti supports foreignizing translations as a way of translation that values the foreign and transfers it to the target language.

Just as Adichie was able to expand her horizons and to escape from the "danger of the single story" by knowing the scarce African literature, Venuti intercedes for the expansion of the horizons of American and English cultures. He pleads for a border opening by hegemonic nations so that they can be more exposed to other cultures and there is more offer in foreign literature for their readers, particularly American and English cultures, since they have the habit of exporting their culture and not the other way around. As Rodrigues (2008) reminds us, we cannot ignore the fact that Venuti's speech,

who is American, comes, therefore, from a hegemonic culture. His hypothesis is based on the premise of welcoming the non-dominant “other” in a dominant culture, that is, in the non-silencing of minority cultures, whether they are colonial or postcolonial. Following this perspective, in Rodrigues’s words

The resistance translation method, the foreignizing method, suggested by the author would not be exactly the most adequate to Brazilian translators, because Brazil does not hold the same political and economical position as The United States and already welcomes the hegemonic other giving him enough voice. From this point of view, the domesticating practice of fluency would be a way of resisting the hegemonic and establishing a political position of resistance to the foreign. (2008, p. 23)⁵

Regarding the Brazilian editorial context, the exports “are not very significant” (MELLO, 2012, p.433). According to statistics, exports “generate about 1% of the annual gross revenues of the publishing sector (0.52% in 2011) and represent 0.02% of the country’s exports in the last ten years” (MELLO, 2012, p.433). There is, therefore, a clear discrepancy in the book trade between countries with more cultural and political prestige and countries with less notoriety in these areas. For this reason, it is crucial to think and discuss about translation always in relation to culture, being it the source or target culture, or both of them.

What should always be kept in mind is that the scope of evaluation of a translation regulates the analysis done of a same method. In this sense, “if seen from the hegemonic pole, domestication would be reductive; if seen from the ‘subordinate’ perspective, it no longer is, becoming a resistance practice” (RODRIGUES, 2008, p.24). Every production and translation context is unique and follows peculiar rules of power. The literature created by Adichie, for example, is written in a hegemonic language – English. However, for the simple fact that her books are not American or British, they might lose value and visibility. Meanwhile, many American and British books portraying Nigerians and other Africans run the world with distinction, spreading unique stories. The writer even

⁵ Translated by the authors. In the original: “A prática tradutória de resistência, estrangeirizadora, sugerida pelo autor não seria exatamente a mais adequada para os tradutores brasileiros, porque o Brasil não ocupa a mesma posição política e econômica que os Estados Unidos e já acolhe o Outro hegemônico dando-lhe bastante voz. Por esse ângulo, a prática domesticadora da fluência seria um modo de resistir ao hegemônico e marcar uma posição política de resistência ao estrangeiro” (RODRIGUES, 2008, p.23).

suggested the unique story one has about Africa might have been influenced by Western literature. As an example, she quotes a few words from the renowned English philosopher John Locke about Africans after his journey to Africa in 1561: “beasts that have no houses” and “people without heads, who have mouth and eyes in their chests”.

Adichie emphasizes that “it is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power”. She adds that “just like our political and economic worlds, stories are also defined by the principle of ‘nkali’⁶. How they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told, depend a lot on power”. Power makes it possible to tell stories, about whom you want to and how you want to. Furthermore, power allows the perpetuation of these stories.

Final remarks

Based on these arguments, the magnitude of the translators’ commitment and the importance of their activity in the configuration of identities become evident. These professionals are relevant agents who hold the great power to silence a voice, or even a culture, when they choose to neutralize certain discourses. In the same way, translators are also capable of playing the role of the spokesperson of a culture when they prefer to lead the foreign to the target language in an undomesticated way. Thus, whether visible or invisible, whether in the political, commercial or literary field, the translator contributes for the configuration of identities and cultures. A choice of book, a choice of method and procedure, and many other decisions made can be seen as ways of resisting or not to what is foreign, of welcoming or not the other. And every action brings along a certain value.

The nature of translation makes it a means of social transformation by itself, as it enables readers to have access to texts from other languages and cultures that would be otherwise inaccessible to them. However, contemporary theories of translation, such as Venuti’s have shown us that merely translating a work of literature might not be enough as there are various ways of translating a text and perhaps erasing elements that could lead to transformation of a text, even if unwillingly. There is more to the issue as it is also

⁶ Word in the Nigerian language Igbo, in which Adichie thinks when she reflects over the power structures of the world. It can be translated as something like “being greater/more important than the other”.

a means of social transformation because it is a situated practice and it provides us with elements to revisit and rewrite our own literary history, repositioning voices and providing opportunity for other stories to be told and heard.

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