The Macksey Journal

Volume 2 Article 89

2021

The New Global Canon of Japanese Women Authors: Minae Mizumura's "Untranslatable" Works in English Translation

Julia M. Walton
Princeton University

The New Global Canon of Japanese Women Authors: Minae Mizumura's "Untranslatable" Works in English Translation

Julia M. Walton

Princeton University

Abstract

In late 2016, a collective of three translators—Allison Markin Powell, Lucy North, and Ginny Tapley Takemori—convened a conference in Tokyo they named the "Strong Women, Soft Power Symposium," gathering translators, academics, authors, editors, and literary agents involved in the Japanese-language literary world to advocate for the promotion of Japanese women authors abroad. Since then, concurrent with larger efforts to close the gender gap among works translated into English, works by Japanese women authors have begun to appear frequently, published by large and small presses alike. This development invites critical attention to these authors' works, which were relatively unknown to the West until now. Particularly of interest are the works of Minae Mizumura, which, unlike many authors who aspire to global success, deliberately engage in a project of "untranslatability." This paper, a selection of my senior thesis on several recently translated Japanese women, critically analyses Mizumura's fictionalized autobiographical novel An I-Novel (1998, trans. 2021) in order to explore what it means for an "untranslatable" work to appear in English. I will reflect on the methods Mizumura's translator, Juliet Winters Carpenter, utilized with Mizumura's collaboration to bring *An I-Novel* to English readers and the shifting aesthetic priorities of the English-language literary market.

Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2021

Keywords: Minae Mizumura, Japanese literature, translation, untranslatability, Haruki Murakami

Disappointed with Japanese novelists, like Haruki Murakami, who ostensibly strip their prose of Japanese cultural and linguistic specificities in service of an easily-translated, Westernized prose, Minae Mizumura calls for a literature that turns away from global universality in service of local particularity, or in her case, that examines what it means to live in Japan and write in Japanese. Mizumura's novel *Shishōsetsu from left to right* (1995) takes up this project in its interest in "untranslatability." A fictionalized autobiographical account of the author's twenty years in the United States and her decision to return to Japan, the novel is written mainly in Japanese, but includes snippets of English prose, necessitating that the text be printed horizontally "from left to right," instead of the vertical, right-to-left style Japanese novels traditionally take. This decision, Mizumura has written, was meant to preclude the possibility of the novel's translation specifically into English. That *Shishōsetsu from left to right* appeared in English as *An I-Novel* just this March (following significant critical and literary attention paid to Mizumura in English and other languages) thus invites critical attention, and I will discuss some preliminary suggestions for the significance of *An I-Novel*'s appearance in English.

First, let us examine what methods Mizumura's translator, Juliet Winters Carpenter, used to overcome the loss of the bilingual aspect of the novel in English translation. The text does occasionally include kanji, katakana, or hiragana characters within the English prose when a particular visual aspect or reading is most at stake. One example, from a moment when

Mizumura's narrator, Minae, and a friend discuss Burnett's *The Little Princess*, reads, "I was struggling to reconcile my friend's name [Sarah] with the little princess's name in *katakana*, セーラ, which had always intrigued me because the sound came out like "sehra," which was also the Japanese pronunciation of 'sailor'" (263). Despite these insertions, Carpenter opted to translate the vast majority of the text into continuous English prose, as opposed to translating the passages originally in English into some other language. However, this did not inevitably lead to the effacement of Mizumura's bilingual project. In order to represent the language switching that occurs within the text, Carpenter made use of different typefaces, aiming that through this visual formal element, the English reader "will glimpse some of the language's richness" ("Translator's Note," viii). In particular, words and phrases that appeared in the original text in English are typically represented in the translated text in bold. This strategy is paired with a "Translator's Note" at the beginning of the text that includes a photo of a page of the original text, information about Mizumura and her *oeuvre*, and short reflections about Mizumura's concern with "the visual aspect of written language" (vi-x), giving the reader some crucial insight into the intent of Mizumura's text.

Here, though, we are compelled to ask: why was Mizumura's novel translated into English, especially since Mizumura—through deep attention to the roles of genre, language, and history within so-called Japan—aimed to resist translatability in her texts? I will return to the question of the market demand for Mizumura's novel, but it is also likely that Mizumura herself was in fact eager for her texts to appear in English translation. Mizumura was an active participant in the translation process, and Carpenter, who has translated all four of Mizumura's texts currently available in English, devised her translation strategy in consultation with her

Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2021

("Translator's Note" viii). We might even say, paradoxically, that Mizumura wrote her texts with an implicit dual audience: in attempting to speak against English and a globalized, English-centric "world literature," she also speaks toward it, because "it is the (at least potential) worldwide circulation [of her text] that gives it a theoretical significance" (Odagiri 254). To understand the significance of this address toward "world literature," we must also ask: what can this novel teach those who know little to nothing about the Japanese language, Japanese literature, or, further, Mizumura's other writing?

The answer to this question, I think, partially lies in the nature of the translation itself. In *Translation and Subjectivity*, Naoki Sakai takes up the problematic of "the untranslatable"; he writes that "Untranslatability does not exist before translation" (5), and that "the work of translation is a practice by which the initial discontinuity between the addresser and the addressee is made continuous and recognizable" (14). By this he means that only through a representation of performing translation are we able to understand two linguistic entities as distinct and incommensurate, even though the translation itself means the significations are "no longer incommensurate" (14). We might say, then, that in the English translation, the "untranslatable" aspects of Mizumura's text "are made recognizable" to the English reader; however, this is especially true insofar as Carpenter provides paratextual context. Though it is perhaps easy to read the continuous English prose without regard for the different typefaces, Carpenter has made clear which sections constituted the Japanese text in the original, and which appeared as English. Bolded phrases and words such as "Long Island," "looseleaf paper," and "loft" give the English reader pause, allowing the reader to reflect on their particular cultural and linguistic significance. The critically-minded English reader thus does have an

Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2021

opportunity to recognize what made the text apparently "untranslatable" into English—that is, the aspects of the text that were already "untranslatable," as English, in the original. This effect, achieved through formal, not linguistic, means, itself destabilizes the claim that Mizumura's text is "untranslatable," offering further evidence that, as Matthew Reynolds writes, "the established idea that [a] text is . . . 'untranslatable' relies on an unduly narrow conception of translation" (Reynolds 13). However, more importantly, in English translation, it seems that English is itself exoticized; the English reader—who rarely is afforded the opportunity to think about language, since theirs is the global lingua franca—is given the opportunity to notice the parochialism of their own language and, correspondingly, to reach for an understanding of the specificities of the Japanese text. In the context of English as the global lingua franca, this strategy, in making the linguistic "seams" of the text visible, perhaps destabilizes the givenness of English itself, though the English reader must read the text in English to arrive at that insight.

Thus, even in English translation, Mizumura's novel "challenges us to reconsider global literature in an age of English" (Shirane 358-359). Mizumura, in providing a window to the interactions between global English and peripheral Japanese, wants the reader to understand the conditions of the global—especially the power dynamics between the global and peripheral languages—as she does; from her globalized, yet peripheral perspective, she encourages an ethos that pays special attention to local particulares, even if these particularities are themselves constituted by global forces. In working creatively with the parameters of global, universal English and peripheral Japanese, Mizumura enacts a globality that suggests (at least, what she sees as) a more productive relationship with universality.

Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2021

What is clear, though, and what is interesting for our purposes, is that, despite Mizumura's resistance to what Tim Parks calls "the dull new global novel," Mizumura has become visible within the realm of "world literature" precisely because she exists in opposition to it (Snyder 142). What Mizumura doesn't address in her work, and what she might not have predicted, is her "symbolic value" as a so-called Japanese author (Sabo 50): Mizumura's ethnic origin and her linguistically hybrid style "are themselves salable" in the English literary marketplace (51). Sarah Brouillette writes that "if critics want to locate and valorize a kind of culture that will not be so readily available to easy market appropriation, they may not be giving the market enough credit. It is a characteristic of contemporary capital that it accommodates critique very well and finds the marketable kernel in even the most virulent anti-market gestures" (Brouillette 103). Certainly, though Mizumura doesn't resist capitalism itself, the success of Mizumura's works in English is a testament to "contemporary capitalism's fetish for particularity and diversity" (94) on an aesthetic level, especially ethnic, linguistic, and cultural particularity.

However, given that many scholars of Japanese literature, such as Stephen Snyder and Takushi Odagiri, predicated that Mizumura's novel would be impossible to translate or bastardized in translation, it is perhaps still surprising that Mizumura's work was received so warmly by critics with some understanding to the text's linguistic significance. This, again, is a testament to the critical framing done by Winters Carpenter in her Translator's Note. Though works in translation are historically unpopular in English, this seems to have been the fault of English publishers' hesitancy to publish multiple works from the same local context; to give the reader tools to understand the cultural, linguistic, and historical forces that shape the text; and

Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2021

to offer a sense for the work's reception in its local context (Venuti). That English readers have a "glimpse" into the meaning and context of Mizumura's work seems to have made all the difference in interest paid to this text beyond the academic sphere.

Works Cited

Brouillette, Sarah. "World Literature and Market Dynamics." *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, edited by Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen, New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 93-106.

Carpenter, Juliet Winters. "Translator's Note." *An I-Novel*, by Minae Mizumura. New York, Columbia University Press, 2021.

Mizumura, Minae. *An I-Novel*. Translated by Juliet Winters Carpenter, New York, Columbia University Press, 2021.

Mizumura, Minae. 私小説*from left to right*. Tokyo, Chikuma Shobō, 2009.

Odagiri, Takushi. "Subculture and world literature: on Mizumura Minae's *Shishōsetsu* (1995)." *Japan Forum*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2013, pp. 233-258. https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2013.780369.

Reynolds, Matthew. "Introduction." *Prismatic Translation*, edited by Matthew Reynolds, Cambridge, Legenda, 2019, pp. 1-47.

Sakai, Naoki. "Introduction." *Translation & Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 1-17.

Shirane, Haruho. "What Global English Means for World Literature." *Think in Public: A Public Books Reader*, edited by Sharon Marcus and Caitlin Zaloom, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, 357-370. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/marc19008.35.

Snyder, Stephen. “Insistence and Resistance: Murakami and Mizumura in Translation.” *New England Review (1990-)*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2016, pp. 133-142. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44841503.

Venuti, Lawrence. “Translations on the Book Market.” *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice*, New York, Routledge, 2013, pp. 158-164.