

## Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Translation: Translation in and of *Please Look After Mom*\*

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It is hard to disagree with the importance of translation today, yet no consensus has been reached concerning its ideal cultural function and ethical effect. “There has probably been a time when issues of nation, language, and translation have been more important or more troubling than they are today,” announces Sandra Bermann in the introduction to *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*. Emily Apter also argues that “translation moved to the fore as an issue of major political and cultural significance,” and warily emphasizes the contradictory processes of translation which reduce, instead of increase, cultural diversity. Indeed, while translation is often heralded as a venue through which one can encounter differences, in many cases, it does the exact opposite and reinforce the homogeneity of a culture under the guise of the foreign. Even in the theoretical discourse, the concept and practice of translation is characterized by ambiguity and contradiction; while translation has proven to be an effective tool for imperial propaganda as well as fortification of nationalism, it also continues to be deemed as useful in imagining an encounter with the irreducible difference of others. Diverse critical thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Paul Ricoeur, Amit Pinchevski, and more recently, Emily Apter have used translation as a “fulcrum” in facilitating their ideas of alterity (Apter 5). Moreover, in *Transfiction*, Klaus Kaindl and Karlheinz Spitzl notice that translation has become “a key concept for describing social processes, particularly those of today’s globalization (2).” At the same time, as translation scholars like Lawrence Venuti has pointed out, it is widely agreed that transparent translation is impossible, and multiple case studies have proven that the translation of literary works often mirrors and thus intensifies the self-image of the cultural entity into whose language the translation is directed.

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The contradicting role translation plays and is expected to play, as well as its complicated cultural and political results, are tellingly illustrated in the case of *Please Look After Mom*. A translation of the Korean novel *Ommarul Put'akhae*, *Please Look After Mom* recorded an unprecedented circulation in the U.S. for a translated novel in 2011. In *Please Look After Mom*, two contradictory impulses of translation are at work. On the one hand, universalizing impulse in the service of the post-9/11 American nationalism conditions the marketing and media presentation of the translated novel's circulation. At the same time, the specific and peculiar way in which translation is thematized in the novel testifies to the unarticulated yet unquenched desire for the uncanny and disruptive encounter with the unfamiliar other. In other words, *Please Look After Mom* shows one complex way in which the question of how to imagine and relate to others, a question that became urgent in post-9/11 America, was dealt with. In turn, the commercial success of *Please Look After Mom* in the U.S. had been widely celebrated in Korea, boosting the sales and the popular appreciation of both the original novel and its translation further. If one focuses on the manner in which *Please Look After Mom* was marketed in the U.S. and acclaimed in Korea, it does appear to have coincided with the prevailing nationalism of both countries respectively. On a closer scrutiny, however, and perhaps ironically, the novel stages an idea of translation that raises the question of how to engage with the intractable unfamiliarity of the other. This article reads *Please Look After Mom* as a peculiar cultural phenomenon, examining its translation along with the original text and the circumstances that surrounds its translation, marketing, and reception. The case of *Please Look After Mom* ultimately helps to map a complicated international and intercultural force field that is critical in understanding the paradoxical way translation works today.

### I. Nationalism, multiculturalism, and translation

Examining the ways in which translation affects the construction of national identities, Pransanjit Gupta notes that “[i]t is the popular, middle-range literature with realist values that gives us a sense of our society as it is today, that tells us how other people like us live and act, that creates in us a sense of nation” (178). *Ommarul Put'akhae* would be a good example of this kind of “popular middle-range literature.” Written by one of the most famous authors in Korea, Shin Kyung-Sook, *Ommarul*

*Put'akhae* sold a record one million copies within two years of its publication in a country with a population of 50 million. Alfred A. Knopf Inc., trusting the popularity of the original work, orchestrated the translation and marketing of *Please Look After Mom* (Hoffert). Released in April 2011, *Please Look After Mom* soon appeared on Amazon's list for “Best Books of the Month: April 2011.” Further, it was chosen by Oprah Winfrey as one of her “18 Books to Watch for in April 2011.” Later in the year, the book was listed as one of *The New York Times*' hardcover fiction bestsellers.

The main plot of *Ommarul Put'akhae* revolves around the central character of the novel, Park So-nyo, the book's Mom. Park was married to her husband at the age of 17 in the 1940s, and it is implied that her early marriage was arranged to save her and her groom from Japanese recruitment for WWII. Since then, she single-handedly raised five children and supported many relatives while struggling against war and poverty. Her husband, who often cheated on her and left home for long periods, was merely one of the many family members that she had to feed and care for. Now suffering from Alzheimer's, Park goes missing at the start of the novel, and in their reminiscences, the narrators of the novel—Park's children and her husband—often mythologize Park's love and productivity. For instance, they frequently note that Mom's hands “could nurture any life,” and that “anything she touched grew in profusion” (*Please* 133). In their mind, Park appears as a perfect personification of the mythic—self-sacrificing and nurturing—motherhood in Korea.

Not surprisingly, this myth of motherhood has been criticized for limiting women's role in Korea. For instance, it is often accused of damaging contemporary women's self-image, implicitly assuming that self-sacrifice for the family is the ultimate life goal of all women. Nevertheless, the mythic Korean Mother is still a vital part of everyday vocabulary in Korean popular culture, as indicated by the constant reproduction with minor variations in popular songs, TV dramas, movies, fiction, and poems—through virtually every cultural venue. Almost worshipped as the one image that imparts to the country its cohesion and uniqueness, it is difficult to criticize it without instigating angry responses. The back cover of the original copy of *Ommarul Put'akhae* introduces the book thus: “Shin vividly brings to life the Mother who sacrifices her entire life for her children.” The second commentator on the same cover defines the novel as: “A story about the original sin of all children in the world. A story about ourselves who depended on Mom and then pushed her away.”

A story that enlightens those for whom it is not too late; a painful story that sadly consoles those for whom it is too late.” These comments, along with the guilt and nostalgia that are implied in them, are products of the particular historical and political condition in which Koreans find themselves in the 2000s. The myth of the Korean Mother serves as a mighty symbol of the older generation’s sacrifice for the younger generation in a country that struggles to bridge the sharp emotional and cultural gaps between generations. The mythic Korean Mother not only embodies the complex emotional response of Koreans to their nation’s fast and turbulent modernization, but also reflects the contemporary political agenda that seeks to reinforce a conservative national identity. The success of *Please Look After Mom*, therefore, was taken to be endorsing the conservative message that the novel’s image of the Korean motherhood appeared to convey.

On the other side of the pacific, however, *Please Look After Mom* responded to a different cultural and political need. In fact, it is difficult to appreciate the so-called Korean Mother figure without a fairly thorough understanding of modern Korean history. Moreover, as Venuti notes, “translation inevitably domesticates foreign texts” as the selection of the texts to be translated “answers to particular domestic interest (67).” Regardless of what Korean journalists have claimed, the appeal of the figure of Mom alone cannot sufficiently explain the considerable attention the novel received from the American public. Indeed, instead of empathizing, American critics such as Janet Maslin and Maureen Corrigan have been wary of the potentially disempowering effect of the representation of women in the novel, suggesting that the appeal of the mother figure may not be universal in the sense that Koreans wanted to believe it to be.

In the U.S., multiculturalism became the center of public debate after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. Since the culture wars of the 1980s, James Kyung-Jin Lee writes, multiculturalism functioned as “the nation’s operative fantasy (xiii),” which attempted to reimagine “how to reorganize the heretofore unequal representation of American life,” but ended up building the walls between races even higher (xvi). In “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism” Slavoj Žižek criticizes multiculturalism as the “ideal form of ideology of global capitalism (44),” and condemns it for sanctioning a harmless other deprived of any substance at the expense of “the real Other” (37). In the wake of 9/11, from another end of the political spectrum, multiculturalism was accused

of compromising national safety by adulterating national unity. As Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul note, “9/11 damaged multiculturalism because it highlighted the risks of tolerating difference,” and as a consequence, conservative politicians publically began a movement to “discredit multiculturalism and justify American expansionism” (13). When in 2001, Lynne Cheney, the extreme right-wing politician and wife of the then Vice-president, “publicly attacked educators who had sought to promote multicultural teaching and internationalism as a response to rising anti-Americanism” (7), she was voicing the core argument of this anti-multiculturalism movement. Rubin and Verheul remarks that Cheney’s “decision to assail what she called the multicultural argument in the wake of the national disaster” demonstrates the importance of the issues of multiculturalism and diversity in the process of revising and/or strengthening the sense of American unity after 9/11 (7).

Nevertheless, having realized the world’s hostile rejection of its self-imposed image and power, the U.S. faced a different challenge—an urgent need to learn more about and communicate with other cultures. The U. S. has long been notorious for its indifference to foreign literatures; nevertheless, as Luise von Flotow explains, when Americans “felt the current, severely compromised, image of the United States, largely, but not only, encapsulated in the September 11, 2001 attacks and their aftermath,” literature was considered to be “one of the most important forces with which to repair the world’s view of the United States (22).” Translation, even if unintended by individual translators, reflected this shift in the national focus. In 2005, the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy submitted “Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy” to the U.S. Department of State. The writers of the document acknowledge the urgent needs to “educate Americans on the values and sensitivities of other societies,” and strongly recommend an increase in translation to satisfy it. According to the document, U.S. publishers publish comparatively few translations (only 3% of all books published annually). It is due to this lack of translation, the Committee argues, that “we [Americans] are not privy to the conversations – literary, philosophical, political and spiritual – taking place in much of the world.” Because translation is one of the more effective means to reverse “the erosion of our trust and credibility within the international community,” the Committee bids the American government to “to set aside funds for translation projects, into and out of English, of most important literary, intellectual, philosophical, political, and spiritual works from this and other

countries.” Translation of foreign literature is expected to perform the important double task of educating American people and enhancing national security.

The U.S. needed to augment its sense of unity while increasing its embrace of other cultures for the sake of national security. Knopf’s choice to translate *Ommarul Put’akhae* and the subsequent marketing of *Please Look After Mom* is a part of the complicated cultural responses to this post-9/11 dilemma. When American readers encounter the familiar conservative family values in this foreign novel, they would recognize the values as universal. This seeming proof of validation could intensify the essentialist claim of united national identity despite, or perhaps because of, beliefs in the differences that the nation supposedly embraces. Mee-Ju Ro, while examining the politically unrecognized role of a mother in modern history, also notes that the novel “offers putatively Western audience the opportunity to sample authentic Korean life at a safe distance, while reassuring them of a certain familiarity in a romantic notion of family love (Ro 153).” Thus, the reason why the translated novel was noted and read by many American readers had more to do with the U.S. than with Korea—more specifically, the cultural dilemma that the U.S. found itself in after September 11, 2001 (i.e. 9/11). In other words, *Please Look After Mom* was commercially successful because it adequately responded to the need of the receiving culture. However, the translated novel’s commercial success was celebrated in Korea as no other Korean novel had previously received similar acknowledgement from American readers. Korean reviewers and journalists excitedly noted that with this book, “the Korean Mother,” a central figure in the novel as well as cultural icon in Korea, was proven to be a universal figure<sup>1</sup>.

## II. Translation in *Please Look After Mom*

The way in which translation is figured in *Ommarul Put’akhae*, however, resists the political appropriation of otherness to some degree. The novel employs translation to signify radical unsettling differences, and as a metaphor that epitomizes a meeting between the self and the other, translation in the novel raises questions concerning the complex relation-

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Ilyoung Im, “Artist of the Year,” Soo-Ung Uh, “Writing New History in the U.S.: *Please Look After Mom*,” and Kanghyun Chung, “The World Reads *Please Look After Mom*” (2011).

ship one has with the other. Arguably, the alienating effect of the trope of translation is stronger in the *Please Look After Mom* as it is amplified by the fact of it being yet another translation. From the very beginning of *Ommarul Put’akhae*, the incident of losing Mom is presented as analogous to that of the act of translation. The novel’s first chapter is narrated by Chi-hon, Park So-nyo’s elder daughter and a successful novelist, in a second-person point of view. As Irene Kacandes points out, the second person narration invites the reader to get involved with the narrative in a uniquely direct way, as the readers “cannot help feeling that they themselves are addressed (332).” The novel’s third chapter, narrated by Park’s husband, also employs the second-person point of view, but this second “you” is an honorific “you” in Korean and sounds more distant than the “you” of the first chapter. Moreover, in later chapters, Chi-hon is the one to whom every other member of the family turns to find and remember the missing mother. In other words, Chi-hon is the character through whom the reader meets Park So-nyo first and last, and she is the narrator who channels the readers’ encounter with Park. The fact that Chi-hon is a writer whose works are translated into foreign languages is important as it is through her that the author connects the impossible act of knowing and writing Park with that of translation.

Chi-hon imagines the moment Mom went missing in relation to her experience of facing her words translated into a language she cannot read: “as your[Chi-hon] mom’s hand got pulled away from Father’s, you were in China. You were with your fellow writers at the Beijing Book Fair... You were flipping through a Chinese translation of your book at a booth when your mom got lost in Seoul Station (*Please* 10).” Repeatedly failing to find adequate words to describe and define her mother, Chi-hon loses her confidence in her knowledge of who her mother is. In Chi-hon’s desperate mind, her translated works keep surfacing, figured as a symbol of the impossible task of understanding and communicating the complete otherness that Park represents. Chi-hon, as an author, loses control and meaning of her language through translation, and this echoes her realization of how her Mom is an alien to her. As translation symbolizes the loss of one’s own words on being made into someone else’s, so does losing her mom compel Chi-hon to recognize the unfamiliarity of her mom, the one person she felt closest to at one point. Translation, in other words, symbolizes the gap, and not the crossing, between individuals and generations in the novel.

It is also through translation that otherness is made to be felt, however

momentarily. The image of touching and tasting illuminates this nature of translation in both versions of the novel. The earliest instance that compels Chi-hon to see Park as an individual woman outside her role of Mom is when she visits Park after giving a talk at a Braille Library. In the library, Chi-hon is presented with her book translated into Braille and finds herself at a loss, unable to talk about her book except in a manner that highlights its alienation from her as its author. On leaving the library, Chi-hon buys a large octopus on a whim and decides to bring it to Park at her country home, continuing to feel bewildered by her experience at the Braille library. When Chi-hon enters Park's house, she finds her mom suffering from an extreme headache, unable to recognize even her own daughter. The next day, Park cooks the octopus, and Chi-hon, seeing Park unfamiliarly for the first time, talks to her about her book in Braille. As Ro points out, translation in the scene represents an experience of meeting the other that eludes one's language: "[t]he daughter's story precipitates at the moment when she recognizes an incommensurability between what she would like to convey and the words available to her. So she holds her mother's hand and begins to tell the story of her book dedication at the Braille library: in effect, she begins to tell the story of moment of translation at the very moment that familiar modes of linguistic communication fail her (157)." In other words, translation serves as a mode of a contact that is different from lucid linguistic understanding. Though two entities are involved in the act of touching, they do not mix. Connected to this idea of touching, translation in the scene symbolizes a contact between incommensurable differences without subjugation or synthesis.

In this sense, despite the soap-opera-like emotional overflow that *Ommarul Put'akhae* sometimes displays, the metaphor of translation adds a reflexive layer that is critical of its own attempt to stage the illusory myth of the Korean Mother. Mom is always already missing in the novel. Park goes missing at the very start of the novel and is never found. Later, even when Park's voice is directly heard, she is neither alive nor dead; she is more of a ghostly being. As the novel is structured on Mom's non-presence, at the heart of the novel lies the incomprehensible, intractable alterity, or the very prominent absence of it; and the analogy of translation effectively marks this lack. In this way, Park remains to be an impossible translation of an ideal in *Please Look After Mom*.

Thus featured as an untranslatable figure forever under translation, *Please Look After Mom*'s ghostly ideal of Mom functions in a similar manner to Walter Benjamin's pure language in his philosophy of

translation. According to Benjamin, the impossibility of reaching the state of pure language not only highlights the foreignness of each language, but also renders the differences meaningful. In *Please Look After Mom*, whereas the place of the mythical mother is emptied through the analogy of translation, the varied embodiments of motherhood mark the historical and individual specificity of each female character. For instance, even though her children consider her to be the embodiment of the Korean Mom, in Park's own narration she deviates significantly from the perfect motherhood, and she longs for her own mother. The younger daughter of Park is also a loving mother of three children, but she raises her children differently from her mother. In addition, refusing to marry her boyfriend, Chi-hon resists the pressure and expectation that Korean society imposes on women. Although she is the one that looks for her mother most desperately, she also is the one who first sees her mother as a person rather than simply as Mom. Instead of being presented as an idealized model that every woman has to emulate, the Korean Mother is dethroned as an idea that becomes meaningful only through individual interpretations, which highlights the uniqueness of each individual. The imaginary ideal exists only in new, different, and at times, subversive interpretations of it.

The manner in which Pieta is evoked toward the end of the novel also resonates with this emphasis on the absence of ideal motherhood. The posture of a grieving mother holding her dead baby first appears when Park holds her stillborn baby, and is later repeated when she joins her mom in another world—an imaginary time and space beyond life. Then, at the very last moment of the novel, Chi-hon, remembering her mother's earlier bidding, visits Vatican City and stands before the Pieta. As she prays "Please, please look after Mom (*Please* 237)," the holy statue is made to symbolize a universally recognized motherhood, but only as an impossible and nonexistent ideal that makes the differences of each of its translations meaningful. Arguably, this effect is intensified even further in the English translation as its reader cannot but be conscious of the fact that they are reading a translation, highlighting the importance of acknowledging and respecting each translation however removed it is from the original.

### III. Translation of *Please Look After Mom*

The translator of *Please Look After Mom*, Kim Chi-Young, acknowl-

edged in an interview that “the English version of *Please Look After Mom* is somewhat different from the Korean original.” This difference, as Kim emphasizes, is the result of the collaboration between the translator, the editors, and the author. According to Kim, she “had the most interactive experience doing *Please Look After Mom*. The editor would ask questions and make suggestions, and I would answer what I could and ask the author clarify, or if she could add more or delete, depending on the editor’s suggestion.” In an interview, the author of *Ommarul Put’akhae* approved of the American translation, saying that working with the editors and the translator for *Please Look After Mom* made some of her ideas more lucid. In other words, the translation of *Please Look After Mom* was a collaborative project. This means that the final translated text of the novel should not be considered only as the result of the translator’s personal choices, but rather a collective product that reflects and responds to the cultural need that the two culture’s interaction gave rise to. It is not the intention of this section to criticize *Please Look After Mom* as one translator’s work, but rather to examine the political significance of the translated text as a cultural product.

When compared to *Ommarul Put’akhae*, the most notable feature from the very first page of *Please Look After Mom* is the increased explicitness, which produces a more direct and engaging narrative voice. While analyzing the “translation mismatches that have narrative significance” (207) in *Please Look After Mom*, Peter Lee identifies numerous cases of “narrative voice mismatch” and argues that “the pattern at work seems to be one of making the narrative voice more direct and assured” (222). For instance, Lee’s literal translation of the sentence that describes the moment when Mom gets lost reads: “Father said he and Mom were trying to get on the subway that had just arrived” (224). In *Please Look After Mom*, the sentence is translated as: “Mom and Father rushed toward the subway that had just arrived” (*Please* 10). Although the change may appear to be a harmless polishing of the syntax on the surface, it subtly yet profoundly alters the manner in which Chi-hon, the articulator of the sentence, interprets the incident of losing her mom. In Korean, Chi-hon does not exactly know how she lost her Mom as she heard about the incident second-handedly. In the translation, she does. As a result of these and similar changes in the narrative voice, Chi-hon appears less confused and more in control of the situation in the translation than in the original Korean version.

In addition, *Please Look After Mom* contains new information that is

not found in *Ommarul Put’akhae*. Kim, the translator, has explained that while translating situations peculiar to Korean culture, she “had to add on some explanatory details” that are not found in the Korean original at the editor’s request. For instance, when relating Hyong-chol’s memory of the time his father brought a mistress home, several sentences are inserted that clarify Hyong-chol’s personality by comparing his response to those of his younger siblings.

But the woman (the mistress) went to town and bought new containers. They weren’t yellowish aluminum containers but special ones that kept the rice warm. *Awed, his siblings touched the new containers cautiously. When the woman handed them their lunches, his brother and sisters looked at him. He would push his lunch toward the end of the porch and leave for school alone. His siblings would wait until he was out of sight, then go to school themselves, carrying their warm lunches in their hand.* (*Please* 82. italics added)

The four italicized sentences are not present in the original Korean. In Korean, the cultural significance of being an eldest son tacitly helps the reader to imagine Hyong-chol’s qualities. Hardly expecting the same from the American readers, the American editor must have felt the need to make Hyong-chol’s personality more obvious. Other minor instances of editorial intervention also can be easily found. Circumstantial information is often added as temporal and spatial markers in order to make spatio-temporal transitions explicit and more reader-friendly.

In contrast, in cases for which the mention of specific individuals may alienate characters from American readers, the names of those individuals are translated into vague personal pronouns. For example, when the Korean Chi-hon discovers Park’s chronic illness, she thinks that “you wanted to tell your brothers to take her to a big hospital...” (*Ommarul* 37). The American Chi-hon, however, replaces “your brothers” with a vague “them” (*Please* 26). The effect of this seemingly minor change is that Chi-hon appears less dependent on her elder brothers. Similarly, Hyong-chol, the eldest son, is also made more appealing to American readers. In the original, he expresses his frustration mainly at his wife (*Ommarul* 133), but in the translation his frustration is directed toward “everyone” (*Please* 109), making him appear less patriarchal. Both the specification and the generalization aim to prune the main characters of their uncomfortable unfamiliarity that may prevent American readers from identifying with them. As a result, similar to Chi-hon, the other

major characters appear Americanized in *Please Look After Mom* while the novel's emphasis on the importance of the family ties emerges intact, if not intensified. The intended result of these changes appears to be a universal emphasis on the apolitical theme of family love. On the cover of the first edition, *Please Look After Mom* is advertised to be: "at once an authentic picture of contemporary life in Korea and a universal story of family love."

One mismatch symbolically illustrates the direction which the translation of *Please Look After Mom* takes—the Korean rhetorical expression that identifies Mom in *Ommarul Put'akhae*, "cow eyes," is missing in the English translation. Because Park So-nyo's look dramatically changes after she goes missing, the only feature that can be identified with certainty is her eyes. When Chi-hon and Hyong-chol go to a place to check on a report that their mother had been seen there, they meet two boys who saw a beggar-like elderly woman a few days ago. The boys argue amongst themselves because the woman looked different from the picture of Park that Chi-hon brought with her. It is Park's unique eyes that convince these boys, her children, as well as the reader, that it was indeed her. In the Korean original, these particular eyes of Park are repeatedly called "cow eyes." The simile, "cow-like-eyes," is far less often used than the metaphor, and Shin neither explains the phrase nor offers any elaboration. Granted, "cow eyes" carries a much more specific cultural significance in the Korean context and it is not as demeaning an analogy in Korean as it is in English. Nevertheless, the expression is still highly ambiguous, as it is repeatedly connected to the absolute otherness of Park So-nyo. The expression "cow eyes" emerges repeatedly when Chi-hon and other characters fail to understand Mom. They note the "cow eyes" of Park So-nyo when they cannot imagine her thoughts, emotions, pain, and sacrifices. In other words, the expression highlights the otherness of Park So-nyo that diminishes the stereotype of the Korean Mom. The rhetoricity of the expression thus underscores the opacity of the character of Park So-nyo and disrupts the smooth figuration process in which Park is transformed into "the Korean Mom."

Gayatri Spivak, while arguing that each language has a different logic and is silent about different things, points out that rhetoric, which points to the silence of a language, is unique to each language (181). As a consequence, the rhetorical aspect of a language highlights the unique limit of the language, whereas logic "contains" its alterity; therefore, "a translator must solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because the rhetor-

ical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner" (372). In other words, according to Spivak, the loss of the rhetorical plane arguably indicates the way in which a translation is intended to function. In this sense, it is noteworthy that the rhetorical phrase "cow eyes" that both marks and obscures the central figure is not translated into English. In the English translation, the phrase is often deleted and replaced by explanatory adjectives such as "big, guileless" (*Please* 15), "honest and loyal" (*Please* 64), "earnest and gentle" (*Please* 101), and "large, dark, guileless" (*Please* 153).

In place of the disturbing cow-eyes of Park, her food marks the difference of the translated novel. One American reviewer has noted that "[r]eading *Please Look After Mom* is like taking a voyage through traditional Korean cooking, which is still one of the more exotic and unfamiliar of the Asian cuisines (Casella 2011)." The variety of Korean dishes in *Please Look After Mom*, "plates and plates of rice and panchan, with kimchi of sesame leaves, braised tofu, sautéed anchovies and algae (Casella)," uncannily resembles Zizek's criticism of multiculturalism: "Liberal 'tolerance' condones the folklorist Other deprived of its substance—like the multitude of 'ethnic cuisines' in a contemporary megalopolis" (37). In fact, when Maureen Corrigan criticized the novel's reactionary portrayal of women during her book review session with NPR in April 2011, she was immediately met with angry responses that accused her of disrespecting cultural and ethnic differences. The debate that followed focused on one phrase in her review, "kimchi-scented Kleenex," and barely on her criticism of the passive female protagonist. The whole controversy proves how American readers understood cultural specificities to be tied to the presentation and appreciation of foreign food in *Please Look After Mom*. In this sense, *Please Look After Mom* is not only a product of Korea, but very much of the American culture, including the way disturbing differences are contained and marked; its significance as a cultural phenomenon lies not only in its relation to the source text of *Ommarul Put'akhae*, but as a cultural product of post-9/11 America.

In 2015, a controversy surrounding Shin Kyung-Sook broke out. Initially, Shin was accused of plagiarizing paragraphs from the story "Patriotism" by a Japanese novelist, Yukio Mishima, in a 1996 short story "Legend." A series of inept responses from the author and her publisher

soon gave rise to multiple accusations of a similar nature concerning her other major works. The fierce public attention the controversy drew outside the usual literary audience was partly due to the fact that Shin was the author of *Ommarul Put'akhae*, whose American translation achieved resounding commercial as well as critical success overseas. Peculiarly, translation was also at the center of the controversy as Shin read Mishima in translation. Unresolved by the author's supposedly final but nevertheless ambiguous apology, the controversy, when seen along with the translation of *Please Look After Mom*, raises a series of complex questions concerning the nature and function of translation: If Shin did plagiarize, whose words did she copy—the author's or the translator's? Or is it both or none? If some of Shin's novels are plagiarized, could or should they be considered Korean? How would these questions affect the cultural identity of *Please Look After Mom*? In other words, to what culture a translated text belong, and with whom the responsibility of the translated words lie? Judging from the active way she cooperated with and approved of the translation of *Please Look After Mom*, and also from the evasive way she responded to the plagiarism controversy, Shin does not seem to know how to answer the questions. The self-serving way Korean public and American readers read and responded to *Please Look After Mom* also shows that Shin is not alone in her indecisiveness. If national borders are "a powerful symbol and a symbol of power" as Robert Tally describes, translation marks both their resilience and collapse (55). Ultimately, the significant cultural influences as well as the confusions that the case of *Please Look After Mom* invoked on both sides of the pacific reminds us that we have to continue to ask the same perplexing yet important questions as similar evasiveness concerning the cultural origin and ethical responsibility prevail international literary scenes today, conditioning and enabling wayward political appropriations of the production and circulation of translation.

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### Abstract

In 2011, *Please Look After Mom*, a translation of a mega-bestseller novel in Korea, entered the American literary market with a significant commercial success. A close analysis of the translation, along with the celebration and controversy it caused on both sides of the Pacific, reveal interesting and often paradoxical ideas about translation and its role in introducing cultural differences. The Korean original, *Ommarul Put'akhae*, employs translation to signify radical unsettling differences, and as a metaphor that epitomizes a meeting between the self and the other, translation raises questions concerning the complex relationship one has with the other. The translation of *Please Look After Mom* reduces critical layers of the original novel, and the reason why it was noted and read by many American readers had more to do with the U.S. than with Korea—more specifically, the cultural dilemma that the U.S. found itself in after 9/11. At the same time, however, *Please Look After Mom* retains and even possibly strengthens the peculiar way in which translation is thematized in the Korean source text. In other words, as a metaphor that epitomizes a contact between the self and the other, translation in and of *Please Look After Mom* raises important questions concerning national identities, cultural differences, international politics and interpersonal responsibilities. This article reads *Please Look After Mom* not only as a translated text, but also as a cultural phenomenon to examine cultural and political forces at work at the site of translation today.

Key Words: Translation, *Please Look After Mom*, *Ommarul Put'akhae*, Multiculturalism, Nationalism

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