

Cultural Identity in Translation of Renata Šerelytė's novel *Vardas Tamsoje*

INGA JANAVICIENE

Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania

Abstract

The article examines the selected elements of cultural identity in Renata Šerelytė's detective novel Vardas Tamsoje and its translation into English. The analysis deals with the thematic representation of cultural identity. Cultural identity, as indicated by Stuart Hall (1996), is defined as 'those aspects of our identities which arise from our "belonging" to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, and, above all, national cultures'. Thematic analysis will present a closer look at several elements of cultural identity, i.e., gender, religion, and historical past. These implications of cultural identity are marked in the novel and discussed in relation to the transition between two historical periods in Lithuanian culture – sovietisation (1956-1990) and Independence (1991) - and their contemplation by the protagonist. From the translation studies point of view, the paper investigates the rendering of cultural identity in the target text as signified by the source text.

Keywords: cultural identity, translation of fiction, thematic analysis, literary translation, identity

INTRODUCTION

Renata Šerelytė (born 1970) is an acknowledged Lithuanian novelist, poet, essayist and literary critic. Her novel *Mėlynbarzdžio vaikai* (2008) has been awarded the prestigious Jurga Ivanauskaitė Award in 2010. The same year, Renata Šerelytė received Austrian Bank Austria Literaris award in the central European Literature category. The novel was selected to represent writers from Lithuania in Frankfurt Book Fair in 2010. Renata Šerelytė has also received a numerous attention from critics. Her works have been largely reviewed by writers and academics. Her fiction has been translated into German, English, and Polish.

The detective novel *Vardas tamsoje* was first published in 2004. It was shortlisted for The Lithuanian Book of the Year Award and was made into a film, later translated into English by Marija Marcinkutė (2018). The novel in English was presented in 2018 London Book Fair. The English translation of the novel received positive reviews from Ewa Sherman, a writer, translator and literary critic (the review was published online in *European Literature Network*) as well as several book bloggers (Jackie Law from the book blog Neverimitate and Robert Pisani from the book blog Thebobsphere). The number of awards and international recognition show that Renata Šerelytė is a prominent Lithuanian writer.

Renata Šerelytė is critically acclaimed for her work that encompasses a wide variety of themes closely related to Lithuanian cultural identity: gender roles, religion, classes in society, history, sovietisation, etc. (Jakonytė-Kvedarienė 2005). The themes that Šerelytė entails in her narratives are often left at the level of implication.

The aim of this paper is to examine how translation, as viewed through the perspective of cultural turn, is used 'as one of the strategies cultures develop to deal with what lies outside their boundaries and to maintain their own character while doing so – the kind of strategy that ultimately belongs in the realm of change and survival, not in dictionaries and grammars' (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1992: 10). The article analyses selected aspects of cultural identity in Renata Šerelytė's detective novel *Vardas Tamsoje* and its translation into English.

Emily Apter believes that the practice of translation is inevitably an act of (mis)communication and becomes 'conflict zone' where something is always lost. As Apter states:

"Unless one knows the language of the original, the exact nature and substance of what is lost will be always impossible to ascertain; even if one has access to the language of the original, there remains an x-factor of untranslatability that renders every translation an impossible world or faux regime of semantic and phonic equivalence" (Apter 2006: 210).

What Emily Apter emphasises in her book *The Translation Zone* is that on a certain level 'something is always lost in translation' (ibid.). Being it semantic, historical, phonic, cultural, etc. the factor of complete perception is always in question. The tension between the original and the source text becomes an intersection where two cultures and languages collide: the zone (Apter 2006), the medium, the place where something unique as well as unfamiliar is produced. Translation neither belongs to the source culture, nor the target culture. It becomes independent and original which function in another time and space.

In Renata Šerelytė's *Vardas Tamsoje* cultural identity is signified through the network of intertextual elements and discourses, opens narratives which are not represented in the translated text and creates an understanding of culture in the target text. Therefore, the equivalence problem in translation put forward not only by linguistic differences in languages but also by context, history, politics (Parlog 2014: 69) is pertinent to the analysis. In translation studies, two ways of rendering a text in translation are commonly discussed: domestication and foreignization. A domestication strategy, as it is widely known for its tendency to favour the target audience and target text, aims at approaching the text with an easily readable or simplified version of text for the target audience (Reed 2019). However, failing to maintain the markers of cultural difference 'can be disrespectful to an author's intent' (Reed 2019: 64). On the contrary, the foreignization strategy is opposite to the domestication, and means that translation process considers cultural differences and creates possibilities to employ certain translation strategies to retain cultural specificity, in this case the representation of cultural identity. Foreignization strategy follows the original text meticulously ignoring the 'difficulties of comprehension or barriers of reception' (Koskinen 2012: 13) the reader might have. Foreignization strategy respects the author, the source text and aims to retain less well-known cultural specificities.

Translation of Cultural Identity in Renata Šerelytė's novel *The Music Teacher* and its translation into Lithuanian

As critics have observed, Renata Šerelytė's fiction represents a part of the collective memory and are intrinsic carriers of cultural identity (Tamošaitis (2009), Peluritytė (2001), Jakonytė-Kvedarienė (2005)). Thus, making cultural identity an important aspect of Šerelytė's oeuvre. Central to Šerelytė's narrative is the themes of religion,

feminist, and historical past. The current analysis will look at the aforementioned rendering of selected elements of cultural identity in the novel and their translation into English.

The title of novel in English is *The Music Teacher* (translated by Marija Marcinkutė in 2018). The central line of the detective story unfolds when a drowned body of an adolescent pregnant woman is found in a local hotel room. The protagonist of the story, now an interrogator in a small town, investigates the case. The situation evokes protagonist's memories of her own childhood and adolescence experiences: her mother's death, her love relationship with an older man, and life in a rural village in Lithuania during the Soviet occupation. Memories affect protagonist's emotional state. Thus, the story is constructed of flashbacks to her childhood, adolescence, her relationship with the music teacher, adult life, and investigation of the case. Although the story unfolds around the investigation, Šerelytė introduces and analyses themes of gender, historical past, and religion at the level of implications.

A central character in Renata Šerelytė's oeuvre is a woman and her life experiences. Šerelytė depicts women as complicated characters as a counterbalance to a stereotypical soviet woman (Kliškauskienė and Kailiūtė 2005: 61). An ideal soviet woman was perceived through the triad: a wife, a mother, and an employee (ibid.). Contrary to the active and ideal woman of the soviet period, Šerelytė portrays women as lost and passive. The excerpt below illustrates when a single mother informed the police about the disappearance of her three-year-old daughter. She explains that her daughter was allowed to walk in the park on her own when the mother was involved in consumption of alcohol with a friend. Although being in the park herself, the mother lost the sight of the daughter, who later disappeared.

Source language: Į policiją kreipėsi moteris – dingo jos trejų metų dukrytė. **Vaikščiojo po parką, vaikščiojo - ir dingo. Kaip į vandenį. Moteriškė su drauge ant suoločio gėrė vyną ir pasakojosi savo nelaimingus gyvenimus, o kai pasakojimo gaida pasiekė kulminaciją, ėmė ir prapuolė tas vaikas, nenusisėkusio gyvenimo rezultatas.** Garbanotas, šviesiaplaukis, putlaus veidelio, rausva striukele, išsimurzinęs šokoladiniu saldainiu. (Šerelytė, *Vardas tamsoje* 2013: 49)

Target language: A woman reported to the police that her three-year-old daughter had disappeared. **She had been walking in the park - and then she disappeared. As if into deep water. The mother had been drinking wine on a bench with her friend; they were telling each other about her unhappy lives, and when the story had reached its culmination, the child (the result of an unsuccessful life) had gone.** She had curly, fair hair, a puffy face and wore a pink jacket. Her face had been all smeared with chocolate. (Šerelytė, transl. Marcinkutė, *The Music Teacher*, 2017: 57)

The protagonist to express the disappearance of a child, uses the idiomatic and colloquial phrase 'kaip į vandenį', which is commonly used when something suddenly disappears (Lithuanian Dictionary of Phraseology, online). The use of the idiomatic phrase implies that 'the world is a hostile place' for a person (Jakonytė-Kvedariene 2005: 7) and for a child. The phrase verbalises the mother's feelings towards environment, it is also an expression of despair and loss. While in the target text, the phrase is interchangeably rendered by 'as if into deep water'. The meaning of the phrase in the target text, as defined by Cambridge Dictionary, is 'to be in a difficult or serious situation'. The connotational difference between the meaning of the phrase in the source text and the target text is visible. A possible interpretation of the difference between original and the translation may be that the source text stresses the fact of

mysterious and sudden disappearance of a child as well as her powerlessness in the hostile world. The target text, by contrast, emphasises the complication of the whole situation, i.e., the child has disappeared.

The problem of equivalence in the rendering of the idiomatic phrases might be ascribed to the inevitable differences between languages, i.e., idiomatic expressions are ascribed to 'frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and, in the case of idioms, often carry meanings which cannot be deduced to from the individual components' (Baker 1996: 63). Idioms are culture specific linguistics expressions that 'encapsulate all the stereotyped aspects of experience and therefore perform a stabilizing function in communication' (Baker 1996: 64). In the text, idioms are easily recognisable and patterned elements of language, which encompasses stylistic, cultural, contextual, and semantics representation of the expression.

It is pertinent to note that the phrase in the source text 'Vaikščiojo po parką, vaikščiojo - ir dingo' brings to light the discussion of the translation of repetition as a literary device. Commonly, repetition entails emphasis or stress on a certain element in the language. Burke and Evers (2014) claim that 'repetition is prominent in the tales' (Burke and Evers 2014: 37), thus, the use of repetition stresses naivety and simplicity. In the above quoted target text, the repetitive phrase is rendered as 'She had been walking in the park - and then she disappeared.'. The past simple in Lithuanian is translated into English as 'had been walking' – the past perfect tense. Although both versions entail a similar repetitive and monotonous action as expressed by different morphological form, the stylistic effect, however, is different.

The last sentence in the source language is a line of a number of adjectives to describe the child: 'Garbanotas, šviesiaplaukis, putlaus veidelio, rausva striukele, išsimurzinęs šokoladiniu saldainiu.' The sentence is constructed without a grammatical subject. The target text splits the sentence into two and inserts additional subjects 'she' and 'her' into the sentences: 'She had curly, fair hair, a puffy face and wore a pink jacket. Her face had been all smeared with chocolate'. The effect of Šerelytė's syntax and the use of commas to separate each element in the sentence in the source text are regarded as a way to stimulate the rhythm of natural language as well as introduce dramatic effect (May 1997: 1). Comma as a punctuation device in fiction is used to add fluidity (ibid.). As Rachel May notes, 'in published translations the clarifying use of punctuation outweigh its interpretative or creative ones' (May 1997: 1). In other words, the intended effect of the original punctuation disappears. In this example in the target language, the sentence is split into two sentences as 'She had curly, fair hair, a puffy face and wore a pink jacket. Her face had been all smeared with chocolate.'. Even a minor change in the use of the full stop, introduces the aspect of logical structure, clarity and accuracy into the narrative. The target text makes use of two terse sentences 'as a way of introducing powerful silences into their narration' (May 1997: 4). The examination of equivalence in the source text and target text reveals the use of various strategies in an attempt to render this idiomatic text.

Another important theme that Šerelytė analyses in her work is societal changes as referred through religion. In Eastern European countries, religion was denied during the period of Soviet occupation; thus, after the Independence in 1991 religious revival came as a counterbalance to the previous official ideology (Petkova 2005: 49). After Lithuania regained its Independence, as in most post-Soviet countries, its people suffered from a severe cultural identity crisis, considerably influenced by diverse experiences in how they see their socio-economic status, cultural prestige, and national identity (ibid.). Religion wise, the period was marked by openness to different

religious believes. Šerelytė, drawing on the cultural refiguration of that time, reconsiders reference to religious and biblical imageries in the novel as an important aspect of cultural identity. In the novel such references are primarily identifiable with the protagonist's language and used to construct and represent her cultural identity as an aggregation of collective subconscious dominant at the time. In *Vardas Tamsoje* fragmented records of past experience related to religious aspect of cultural identity are rendered below.

Source text: *Užtat smokslininkai greitai atkreipė į mane dėmesį: ryžtinga juodbruvė mergina, pasitaisydama smunkančius akinius, ištuštėjusioj auditorijoj priėjo prie manęs ir, prirėmusi prie sienos, suriko, net nuaidėjo po tuščiais skliautais: "Ar myli Jėzų?!" Sutrikau, nes šito anktyvoj vaikytėj manęs klausdavo senelė, o aš jai atšaukdavau, kad ne, nes Dievo nėra, yra tik Leninas. Ką darysi dabar, kai ir Leninas pasirodė besąs toks neilgaamžis?..* (Šerelytė, *Vardas tamsoje* 2013: 59-60)

Target language: *Instead, the conspiracy soon focused their attention on me. A determined dark-haired girl, who kept adjusting her glasses, approached me in an empty classroom, pressed me against the wall and shouted so loudly, that her voice echoed from the empty dome, 'Do you love Jesus?' I grew confused. This was exactly what my grandmother had used to ask me early in my childhood; I would snap back to her, 'No, there is no God, only Lenin.' What should I say now, when Lenin had proven to be so short lived?* (Šerelytė, transl. Marcinkutė, *The Music Teacher*, 2017: 70)

The episode renders a situation when the protagonist leaves her hometown in the countryside of Lithuania and moves to the capital city to seek education. After spending several years at the university, the protagonist is noticed by a member of religious group and invited to join that group. This unexpected encounter not only awakens her childhood memories but also starts to question her relation to religion. Complicated and emotional relation is presented as a counterbalance to reason and logic that prevailed during the Soviet period in her childhood. When the protagonist is invited to join a religious group, she feels rather confused when asked a question: '*Ar myli Jėzų?!'*' The practice of religious believes was suppressed during the Soviet period in Lithuanian (Streikus 2004 np). Thus, the dualism between the freedom, free thinking and external demonstration of the pre-approved attitudes and feelings in dominant cultural discourse is contrasted in the source text.

As Milda Ališauskienė and Ina Samuilova note, religious values and practices 'are the object of internalisation process. An important process in the acquisition of religious knowledge is a primary socialization. Which individual experiences in childhood.' (2011: 70). Naturally, religious knowledge was passed on by the closest people in the environment (ibid.). In the novel, the only person who can pass on religious values and the only person who represents traditional cultural values is the protagonist's grandmother. The meeting revives her memories, and she remembers as similar situation, when the grandmother asked the protagonist if she loved God. The protagonist produced a quick and automatic answer, saying there is no God, only Lenin, as was expected by the dominant ideological discourse at the time, because hesitations or doubts regarding religious believes were unacceptable (Streikus 2004 np). Thus, reflecting on her memories, the protagonist feels lost when asked the same question. It only shows that the protagonist is affected so strongly by the dominant discourse of the Soviet period that when she has the ability to practice religion, she feels lost. The sociocultural elements encoded in the source text not only demonstrate the imposed dominant discourse towards religion but marks the shift from one period to the other

(when the Independence of Lithuania opened the practice of religion). Another relevant point regarding the sociocultural context is the feeling of confusion and loss, identity incoherence and contradiction. Moreover, being a grown-up, she is not sure what to answer about her religious beliefs because the answer she knew is not relevant for the present realia and time.

The category of social class is traditionally signalled by home stability, cultural practices and behaviours which create cultural identities (Manstead 2018). In the novel, Šerelytė portrays toxic family relationships and unhappy childhood: the protagonist's mother's death, her father's addiction to alcohol, her stepmother's dysfunctional character destroys the idea of home as a stable and secure place (Jakonytė-Kvedarienė 2005). After the death of her mother, the protagonist departs from home and spends her childhood and adolescence in an orphanage. The episode below illustrates the negative effects of sovietisation as evoked in the neglect of child's feelings and emotions as a part of Soviet reality.

Source language: *Mirti norėdavau, kai bendrabučio vaikus varydavo į ambulatoriją ir įsakydavo nusirengti tiek, kad likdavau tik su kelnaitėmis. Šios buvo senos, išblukusios ir, kas baisiausia, sulopytos. Felčerės šypsny slypėdavo viso pasaulio panieką, ir aš svajodavau, kaip gera būtų gulėti lovoje ir sirgti kokia nors sunkia liga, kilnia liga – cholera, pavyzdžiui. Tada tas baisus ir būtinas sveikatos patikrinimas man negrėstų, nes juk tikrina tik sveikus arba mirusius. Bet aš, žinoma, nemirčiau – nuo kilnių ligų paprastai pasveikstama.* (Šerelytė, Vardas tamsoje 2013: 157)

Target language: *I felt like dying when the children from the hostel were driven to the clinic and had to undress down to their underwear, which were old and faded and badly patched. The contempt of the world was reflected in the nurse's smiles. It was my dream to lie in bed ill with some terrible, noble disease – cholera, for example. Then I wouldn't be forced to have that horrible health check; they checked only the healthy and the dead. I wouldn't die of course, people usually recover from noble diseases.* (Šerelytė, transl. Marcinkutė, The Music Teacher, 2017: 196-197)

The text in the source language is explicit with the distinctive references to the soviet period reality, e.g., 'bendrabučio vaikai' and 'felčerė'. These cultural elements refer to institutions or places that were usually situated in rural places, small towns and villages. In the source text 'bendrabučio vaikai' refers to children who live in an orphanage. They attend school and live in a dormitory. It was a place for children who were neglected. 'Felčerė' is another word that refers to Soviet realia. As by definition, it is a person who takes care of the sick, a doctor's helper (lkz.lt). The connotational difference is visible in renderings of the target text. Culturally specific and saturated phrases 'the children from the hostel', and 'nurse' are rendered by using domestication strategy. In the target text, then, cultural connotations encoded in the source text, are overlooked. Specific references to the sovietisation period and influence on the protagonist's identity as a representative of a certain social class is not retained. Moreover, the example demonstrates the harsh reality of orphaned children in the Soviet period: as they had to undress for health inspection. The protagonist sees this situation with sarcasm and irony as 'Then I wouldn't be forced to have that horrible health check; they checked only the healthy and the dead.'

An excruciating period of Lithuanian history and culture is conveyed through a myriad of cultural references in the text. Specifically, those realia encode the information about culture and open the window to the nuances which allow an in-depth understanding of cultural identity as signalled by various elements. Naturally,

culturally saturated language causes challenges for the translator, however, deliberate manipulation might introduce different perception of that culture. As Apter puts it, “translation becomes a significant medium of subject reformation” Apter 2006: 6). The focus on the construction of cultural identity as a fundamental device for the representation of Lithuanianess in the novel reformatted and relocated.

CONCLUSION

Cultural identity in Renata Šerelytė's oeuvre has been one of the relevant aspects that provide the socio-cultural framework for the analysis of the novel and its translation. The exploration of equivalence between the source text and the target text has revealed that rendering of cultural aspects related to religion, gender, and social class as constituents of cultural identity in the translation signals struggle between linguistics, semantics, sociocultural as well as extra-textual realisation of translation. Finally, it argues that in the construction of cultural identity in the target text it is attributed to the target readership's preferences for rewriting and textual manipulation of the text for the fluent translation.

SOURCES

1. Šerelytė, Renata. (2013). *Vardas tamsoje*. Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla: Vilnius.
2. Serelyte, Renata. (2018). *The Music Teacher*. Transl. Marija Marcinkute. Noir Press Ltd.

REFERENCES

1. Ališauskienė, M., Samuilova, I. (2011). Modernizacija ir religija sovietinėje ir posovietinėje Lietuvoje/ Modernization and Religion in Soviet and Post-Soviet Lithuania. *Kultūra ir visuomenė*, 2(3), 67-81
2. Baker, M. 1996 (1992). *In Other Words. A coursebook on Translation*. London: Routledge.
3. Bassnett, S., Lefevere, A. (1992). *Translation. History. Culture. A sourcebook*. Routledge: London and New York
4. Burke M., Evers, K. (2014). Formalists stylistics. In *The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics*. Ed. Michael Burke. London and New York: Routledge.
5. Hall, S. (1996). The Question of Cultural Identity. In S. Hall, D. Held, D. Hubert, and K. Thompson (Eds.), *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*. (pp. 595-635) Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
6. Jakonytė-Kvedarienė, L. (2009) Plyšys: moterų ir vyrų santykiai Renatos Šerelytės prozoje. *Lyčių studijos ir tyrimai*. 2009, 7, p. 85-91. 1822-6310 <https://etalpykla.lituanistikadb.lt/fedora/objects/LT-LDB-0001:J.04~2009~1367167555651/datastreams/DS.002.0.01.ARTIC/content>
7. Koskinen, K. (2012). Domestication, Foreignization and the Modulation of Affect. In *Domestication and Foreignization in Translation Studies*. Eds. Hannu Kemppanen, Marja Jänis, Alexandra Belikova. Frank & Timme, Berlin, pp. 13-32
8. Klimašauskienė, I., Kailiūtė, R. (2005). Moters vaizdavimo stereotipai ir jų modifikacijos XX a. antrosios pusės lietuvių prozoje. In *Lyčių studijos ir tyrimai*. 2005, 1, p. 61-65
9. Manstead A. (2018). The psychology of social class: How socioeconomic status impacts thought, feelings, and behaviour. *The British journal of social psychology*, 57(2), 267–291. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12251>
10. May, R. (1997). “Sensible Elocution. How Translation Works in and upon Punctuation”. In *The Translator* 3 (1) pp. 1-20.
11. Pärlog, A.-C.. (2014). *Translation and Literature: an interdisciplinary approach*. Editura Universităţii de Vest: Timişoara.
12. Peluritytė-Tikušienė, A. (2001). Renatos Šerelytės kūryba. *Gimtasės žodis*. 2001, Nr. 5, p. 8-12, 46. Viewed 2021 01 04 [Link <https://etalpykla.lituanistikadb.lt/fedora/objects/LT-LDB-0001:J.04~2001~1367185560451/datastreams/DS.002.0.01.ARTIC/content>](https://etalpykla.lituanistikadb.lt/fedora/objects/LT-LDB-0001:J.04~2001~1367185560451/datastreams/DS.002.0.01.ARTIC/content)
13. Petkova, Diana. (2005). Cultural Identity in a Pluralistic World. In *Cultural Identity in an Intercultural Context*. Ed. Diana Petkova and Jaakko Lehtonen. Publication of the Department of Communication nr 27. University of Jyväskylä.
14. Lithuanian Dictionary of Phraseology: <https://www.lietuviuzodynas.lt/frazeologizmai>
15. Lithuanian language dictionary / Lietuvių kalbos žodynas: <http://www.lkz.lt/>

16. Reed, Sarah. (2019). *Translating Cultural Identity. French Translations of Australian Crime fiction*. New Trends in Translation Studies. Vol. 28. Ed. Jorge Díaz Cintas. Peter Lang
17. Sreikus, A. (2004). *Sovietų Valdžios Antibažnytinė Politika (1953–1967)*. Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras. Access via the Internet <http://genocid.lt/Leidyba/1/arunas.htm>
18. Tamošaitis, Regimantas. (2009). Renata Šerelytė: įbaugintos sąmonės atmintis. *Gimtas žodis*. 2009, Nr. 9, p. 18-22. Available from <https://etalpykla.lituanistikadb.lt/fedora/objects/LT-LDB-0001:J.04~2009~1367168567361/datastreams/DS.002.0.01.ARTIC/content>, viewed 2020 12 20