

With Han's Recent Nobel Prize Win, Now is the Time to Re-evaluate Smith's Translations

[Contributing to the world's attention to Han Kang... Translation criticism should move away from the mistranslation debate and allow translators literary autonomy](#)

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By [Yoon Sun Kyoung \(ysksun\)](#)

Han Kang's Nobel Prize in Literature is not just a personal triumph, but a milestone for Korean literature, culture, and the nation itself. Her works have brought Korea's turbulent modern history to the forefront of global attention. Through her novels, pivotal events like the May 18 Democracy Movement and the Jeju April 3 Incident have gained greater recognition both among young Korean readers and worldwide.



▲ Han Kang, the first Korean to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, speaks at the 18th Pony Chung Innovation Award Ceremony held at I-Park Tower in Gangnam-gu, Seoul on the 17th. (c) Joint Photography FoundationView related photos

The Swedish Academy took particular notice of *Here Comes the Boy* (*Human Acts*) among Han's many

works. Born in Gwangju, Han likely felt a unique connection to this tragic event. Through extensive research of historical records and texts, she transformed it into a novel that portrays citizens grappling with trauma as they confront the brutality of state power, which turns its weapons on its own people.

The Swedish Academy commended Han's exploration of trauma, describing her writing as 'intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life.'

It is important to remember that the Nobel Prize judges do not read Korean. What they evaluated were the translations of Han's novels. This makes the translator's role, and the quality of the translation, crucial in shaping not only the fate of the translation but also the fate of the original text.

For example, Han's Korean original had received little attention both in Korea and internationally until Deborah Smith's English translation *The Vegetarian* won the Man Booker International Prize in 2016.



▲ Deborah Smith, translator of Han Kang's "The Vegetarian," attends a press conference for the 2016 Korean Literature Globalization Forum held at the Seoul International Book Fair International Pavilion at COEX in Samseong-dong, Gangnam-gu, Seoul. (c) Yonhap NewsView related photos

Han is probably the most widely translated author from Korea and the most renowned Korean novelist globally. Behind her prestigious Nobel Prize lies the often-overlooked work of translators. In particular, Smith's contribution was significant, as her English translations of Han's novels first brought the author international recognition. Smith's translations include *Human Acts*, *The White Book*, *Greek Lessons* (co-translated) as well as *The Vegetarian*.

However, Smith's translation of *The Vegetarian* became the subject of a heated controversy in Korea, with many scholars criticizing it for mistranslations. They argued that her creative translation distorted the original and betrayed Korean literature.

However, I took a different stance and published an article arguing that Smith's translation successfully preserved and emphasized the themes and feminist elements of the original Korean text. As a result, Smith's reputation now stands between that of a heroine who rescued Korean literature from its obscurity and a traitor who betrayed it.

This controversy reflects the prevalent views on translation in Korea, where there is a strong emphasis on the primacy of the original text and literal translation, more so than in the Anglo-American world. In discussions about literary translation, the focus tends to be on whether a work is mistranslated, whether it is faithful to the original, and how accurate it is.

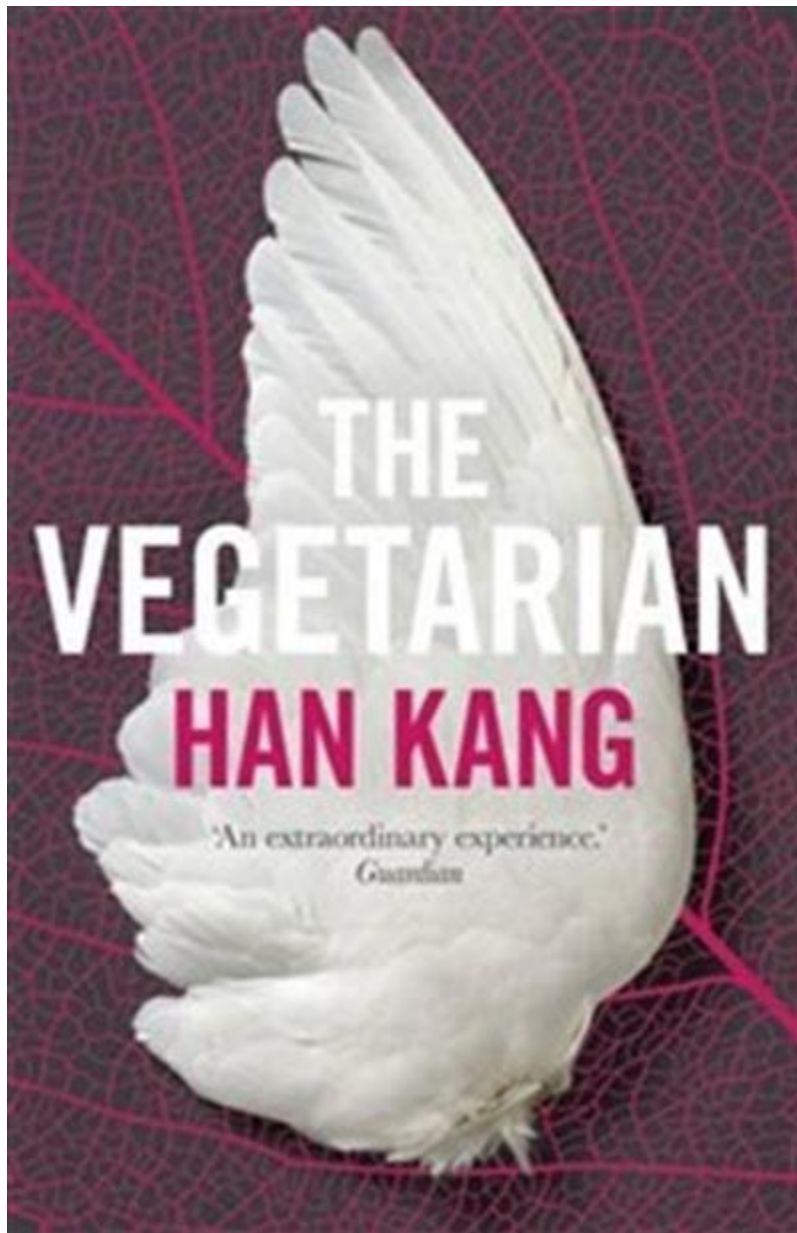
The two languages and cultures are different, as are the writing conventions in each. What is often overlooked is that the standards of good writing in Korean may not apply in other languages. We forget that what moves us may not have the same effect on others.

It's important to remember that international judges and readers don't compare the original with the translation. They read the translation as an independent work—a poem, a novel, a piece of literature—only in their own language

Smith argues that when a great work of Korean literature is translated into English, the translation should itself be a great work of English literature. Instead of strict fidelity to words or grammar, translators should aim for a broader fidelity—one that remains true to the artistry and quality of the original, as well as to the reader's experience of the text.

Thus, literary translation must be *literary*. Translators need literary sensibility and writing skills, not just linguistic knowledge. Smith emphasizes this by explaining that, when choosing a word, she considers its syllables, appearance, sound, and the kinds of connotations and images it will evoke in the reader.

In her translations, Smith uses poetic and lyrical styles, employing literary techniques such as imagery and metaphor to enhance the descriptive and expressive power of the language. In this sense, I believe Smith has skillfully captured the literary essence of Han's works, using her imagination and exceptional writing style to reflect the qualities that make the originals so powerful.



▲ Cover of the English edition of Han River <Vegetarian> translated by Deborah Smith (c) Granta BooksView related photos

To promote Korean literature globally, a new approach to translation is necessary. Translation should be viewed as a creative endeavor, and translators should be granted literary autonomy. Criticism of translations must also shift away from the focus on mistranslation and move in this direction. Smith's translation deserves to be re-evaluated within this broader framework.

When a translator deeply understands the original Korean narrative and recreates it as a 'literary work' recognized in the target language, with exceptional style and prose, Korean literature can resonate with readers worldwide, beyond its borders. Ultimately, translation is literature.

Addendum | The author is an Associate Professor in the School of English for Interpretation and Translation at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

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