

When Metaphor Disappears: Loss in the Translation of Feminist Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how metaphor loss occurs in the translation of feminist literary texts and comparing between human translators and *ChatGPT*. Metaphor is important in shaping meaning, culture, and ideology, but it is also one of the vulnerable elements, since it often simplified, shifted, or omitted. Previous studies have shown that translation loss is unavoidable. However, they rarely compare human and machine translation. This research uses a descriptive qualitative design with a comparative analysis. The data are taken from two Indonesian novels, *Saman* and *Maya*, and the translations produced by human translators and *ChatGPT*. The data is focusing on metaphors related to feminist themes such as body, identity, sexuality, and power. The findings show that human translators tend to keep metaphorical meaning by changing metaphors' vehicle, while sometimes turning metaphors into non-metaphor. In contrast, *ChatGPT* mainly uses more predictable and simplified expressions. So that, human translation keeps more meaning and *ChatGPT* tends to make the text flatter. The study concludes that metaphor loss is not only a linguistic issue but also affects meaning changes.

Keywords: metaphor, feminist metaphor, shift in translation, *saman*, *maya*

INTRODUCTION

Translation has been understood as a process of transferring meaning from a source language into a target language. However, in contemporary translation studies, the translation has been

increasingly understood as a process that is not merely talking about neutral act of transfer, but also a process shaped by linguistic, cultural, and ideological factors. Argued by Baker (2006), translation does not merely shift a meaning, but also actively shapes how events, relationships and identities are represented and understood accross the cultures. In addition, translation is also seen as a process of rewriting in which ideological values and aesthetic norms shape how meaning is constructed (Lefevere, 1992). Furthermore, Venuti (1995) in their book said that ideology of the translators, such as foreignization and domestication determine the visibility of cultural difference. These perspectives collectively positioned translation as a medium where meaning is negotiated rather than reproduced.

In translation, the figurative language, especially metaphor faces a significant challenge. Metaphors are not merely stylistic devices. However, they are a fundamental mechanism of thoughts that structured how individuals conceptualize the abstract experience. Metaphors also operate through conceptual mapping which often related with cultural and experiential contexts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). So that, translating metaphor is more difficult than other text, especially academic text. Translators frequently face dilemma between preserving the metaphorical form and conveying its meaning (Newmark, 1988). Therefore, this problem often leads a shifting of metaphor, either it is becoming the non metaphorical words or experienced vehicle shift.

Such shifts have important consequences, because when metaphor are simplified, replaced, or even omitted, the metaphor will lose the imagery, aesthetic effect, and the conceptual depth. Rather than achieving equivalence, translation often involves the transformation of metaphorical meaning, as noted by Newmark (1988) who conveys the difficulty of preserving metaphor accross language. Futhermore, from a cognitive perspective, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor constitutes a fundamental mechanism of thought. So that, its loss causes a shift in conceptual representation. As a consequences, the disappearance of metaphor can significantly change how text is percieved and understood in target language.

The implication of metaphor translation become more critical in the context of feminist discourse. In feminist literary, metaphor often used to convey embodied experiences, challenging dominant ideologies, and reconfiguring language itself (Kalnická, 2008). As discussed by Irigaray et al. (1985) and Cixous et al. (1976), language plays a central role in shaping gendered subjectivity. Metaphor can function as a tool for resisting patriarchal structures. Through metaphor, abstract concepts such as power, desire, and identity are

expressed in ways that disrupt conventional linguistic norms.

From a translation perspectives, this makes feminist discourse is highly sensitive by shifts in figurative language. When metaphors are shifted into more neutral or literal forms, the ideological forms embedded within them, may be reduced or transformed. Translator must pay attention the rhetoricity of language, especially in texts that carry political and cultural significance. Neglecting those dimension risks flattening the text and its critical voice (Spivak, 1993).

At the same time, the development in translation fields, including the increase using of Machine Translation (MT) and Large Language Models (LLM), introduce additional pressures toward standardization and simplification. MT and LLM tend to favour more frequent and predictable linguistic patterns. It further can cause the marginalization of figurative and culturally specific expressions. As a result, metaphorical language which often complex and context dependent becomes particularly vulnerable because of the generalization (Al Rousan et al., 2025; Shujie, 2025).

Taken together, these perspectives highlight that metaphor is not an optional decorative element in discourse. Metaphor can be treated as a central component of meaning making that intersects with culture and ideology. When metaphor is deleted or changed in translation, the consequences is beyond stylistic loss. The shift affects how experiences, identities, and critical perspectives are represented differently accross languages.

There are many previous studies which discuss about metaphor translation, both by human and machine. Mondal et al. (2025) stated that MT's output is are sometimes obscure and difficult to understand. It indicates that the system still struggle at the level of meaning, especially when dealing with complex or non-literal language. Although the system adopts a modified Transformer model within a photo translation pipeline, the focus remains on improving quantitative accuracy rather than addressing deeper non-literal meaning. On the other hand, Aranberri & Pascual (2025) argues that MT does not merely reproduce language, but also actively reshapes it. MT produces outputs that are not fully natural, instead it uses certain linguistic patterns in target language. In relation to metaphor translation, such pressure helps explaining why figurative espressions are often flattened and constrained. MT system tend to produce more predictable and literal constructions, which can limit the preservation of metaphorical nuance and contribute to broader patterns of semantic reduction.

Next, the phenomenon of translation loss has been widely recognized as a universal and inevitable aspect of translation. For

example, Birjandi et al. (2025) finds that humor is often partially transferred in translation and leading to a reduction in communicative effect. Similarly, Abdelkarim et al. (2025b) emphasizes that translation loss can occur accross multiple levels, such as lexical, semantic, and stylistic level due to linguistic and cultural gaps. This multi-layered loss is further support by (Ali et al., 2025) which shows that humor is frequently diminished due to literal translation, formalization, and cultural mismatch. It results of loss of meaning, tone, interpersonal functions, and character dynamics. In addition, Abdelkarim et al. (2025a) highlights that literal translation can obscure deeper and multi layered meaning which embedded in homonymous expressions, ultimately affecting reade interpretation. Taken together, these three studies suggest that translation loss is not an isolated or accidental phenomenon. However, it is the outcome of a complex interaction between linguistic structure, cultural context, and the technique of translation.

Beyond linguistic and stylistic dimensions, translation loss also operates at the level of culture and ideology. Wesołowski (2025) shows that translation reshapes connotative and emotional meaning. Domestication ideology tends to produce a reduction effect while foreignization result in more ideologically loaded expressions. The findings indicated that the translation process does not simply transfer meaning but actively transform its ideological weight. Similarly, B. Zhang & Mo (2025) argues that translation is not neutral. It is guided by certain beliefs such as conveying the truth or the usefulness. Strategies like omission, euphemism, and substitution used to reshapes or softens the meaning. This results show that the translator is an active ideological agent. This perspective is strengthened by Fred (2025), which conceptualizes translation as a political process. In translation, meanings are possible to continuously reformulated, omitted, or reframed as they are adapted into practice. It is leading to both loss and the creation of new meanings. All these studies argue that translation loss is not merely talking about losing language, but also about changes in culture and ideology. It means that meaning is not only lost but also reshaped within larger power structures.

Metaphor in translation is highly vulnerable. This is shown in Gabdkarimova et al. (2026) study in which discusses about figurative language translation always involves changes in both structure and meaning. As a result, metaphor becomes the most fragile element because it relies on form, cultural symbolism, and conceptual mapping. Further, Oleniak (2025) in their research stated that the English translated versions tend to generalize meaning and prioritize

clarity over form rather the source text. As a result, the cultural embedded meanings are weakened. Similarly, Cîndea & Jerpel (2025) in their research found that the poetic dimensions such as sound (melapoeia) and cultural meaning are necessarily sacrificed, even though the imagery (phanopoeia) are preserved. The findings show the impossibility of maintaining all semiotic layers simultaneously. This unavoidable trade-off is further explained in Hardiyanti et al. (2025) which conceptualizes translation as a constant negotiation between form and meaning. When the translator prioritize the semantic clarity, it often leads into paraphrasing, transforming, or the disappearance of metaphor. As a conclusion, these studies show that metaphor loss is not merely a technical issue. This is the consequence of translator decision which chose to prioritize clarity over keeping complex figurative language. So that metaphors are more likely to be simplified, changed, or lost.

Translation loss can be more precisely explained by examining the interplay between translation techniques and the shifts they produce. This is clearly illustrated in Segal' Kendenan et al. (2025), which demonstrates that rhetorical structures such as parallelism are not only formal features, but also have significant functional and ideological roles. When the translator choose translation techniques such as reduction or discursive creation, it often results in shifts that break the connection between form and function. Nevertheless, it leads into the loss of implicit ideological meaning. Shift is not appearing incidentally, but it is an inherent consequence of the using of translation technique. This perspective is emphasized by Humanez-Berral & Hermán-Carvajal (2025), which shows that the techniques used directly correlates with shifting. It indicates that the technique choices are a main factor behind the transformation in translation. Furthermore, C. Zhang & Lei (2025) finds that multimodal translation has been done by reshaping the meaning instead of directly transferring it. It highlights that translation is not simply just finding the equivalence. Overall, these studies show that translation loss is inherent with the use of techniques as each choice has the consequences, whether reshaping meaning at linguistic or ideological levels.

Despite the breadth of previous studies, the researcher find an important gap remains. While previous studies have explored translation loss from linguistic, cultural, ideological perspectives, the vulnerability of metaphor, and the limit of machine translation, these areas are rarely connected. Most research has not been examined how metaphorical loss or shift affect the ideological meaning, especially in the field of feminist literary. In addition, although machine translation

has often been evaluated based on the naturalness, only few studies that directly compared how metaphor loss occurs between human translators and AI system such as *ChatGPT*. As a result, the relationship between metaphor, feminist, and translation agents is still not well understood. The gap leaves unanswered how the loss of metaphor may differently shape feminist meanings in human and machine translation. Therefore, a more focused and comparative study is needed to examine how metaphor loss works across both human and *ChatGPT*'s translation result.

METHOD

This study adapts a descriptive qualitative study, with multiple case studies. Since it aims to explore and interpret the phenomenon of metaphor loss in translation. In addition, this study adopts a comparative text-based analysis by examining translations produced by human translators and *ChatGPT*. The data of this study is coming from two Indonesian novels written by Ayu Utami, titled *Saman* and *Maya* and their translated versions, translated by human translators and *ChatGPT*. The data were collected through close reading and purposive sampling, because the study focuses specifically on metaphors that carry the ideological significance. The procedures involved:

1. Reading both novels to identify the metaphorical expressions in the source text
2. Selecting the metaphors that contains feminism ideology (those related to woman, body, identity, sexuality, and power).
3. Extracting the human translated versions
4. Generating the *ChatGPT*'s versions using the consistent prompts.
5. Analyzing which metaphors are translated into non-metaphor and which metaphors are experienced vehicle shift.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Table 1. Shifting of Metaphor

Translator	Technique	Shifting	
		Shift in metaphor Vehicle	Shift into Non-Metaphor
Human Translators	Established Equivalence	24	
	Paraphrase	1	
	Discursive Creation	3	1
	Explicitation		2
ChatGPT	Established Equivalence	2	

a. Shift in Metaphor Vehicle (Human Translator)

i. Established Equivalence

ST: *Karena itu, jangan pernah diberikan menikah, sebab kau akan menjadi barang pecah belah*

TT: So, you must never give it away before you get married, because then you will be damaged goods

The data occurs in the context of patriarchal norms related to women's bodies and sexuality. The expression "*jangan pernah diberikan sebelum menikah*" (you must never give it away before you get married) refers to virginity as something valuable that must be maintained. Next, the phrase "*barang pecah belah*" (damaged goods) constructs a metaphor that links women with fragile material objects. The material objects will lose their value once "damaged", so do women. Through this metaphor, the female value is understood within a framework of object, where its value depends on their virginity.

In the data above, the technique of established equivalent can be seen in the translation of "*barang pecah belah*" into "damaged goods." The translator uses an existing expression in English that directly can convey the meaning. In general, the basic meaning of the metaphor is maintained through an equivalent choice of lexical in the target language.

However, the researcher identified a shift in the metaphor vehicle. In the source language, women are mapped onto the domain of fragile materials. In the target language, the mapping shifts to the domain of commodities. The expression "damaged goods" not only emphasizes damage, but also implicitly explains market logic which believe that the value of an item decreases once it is "used" or "defective." Thus, although the metaphor is preserved, there is a shift in conceptual mapping from material fragility to commodification.

ST: *Lalu tertinggal temanku dengan kangen yang telah disentuh hingga bangkit*

TT: My dear friend would left stranded with her hopes still high

The context of data describes Laila's emotional condition that repeatedly manipulated by Sihar, the secret lover. The expression "*kangen yang telah disentuh hingga bangkit*" (her hopes still high) constructs a metaphor that links the longingness with embodied experience. The emotion is pictured as if it can be touched and awakened.

In this data, the technique of established equivalent can be seen

in the translation of “*kangen yang telah disentuh hingga bangkit*” into “her hopes still high.” The translator uses a common expression in the target language in order to convey the character’s emotional state. However, there is a shift in the metaphor vehicle. In the source text, emotion is understood through embodied experience “touched” and “awakened.” In contrast, in the target text, the emotion represents through an abstract domain namely hope, which is more intangible. This shift reflects a change in how emotional experience is constructed. Initially, in the source text, longing is presented as something physical. In the target text, it becomes more abstract and cognitive. Thus, although the general meaning is conveyed, there is a shift in the conceptual mapping of the metaphor.

ii. Paraphrase

ST: *Dan ia ingat si Tuyul bermata merah yang mencampurkan birahi dan cemooh ke dalam cairan tubuh yang menjijikkan sekaligus menggairahkan.*

TT: Tuyul, with his red eyes, also crossed her mind; the imp-like man who mixed banter with his lust, which at once disgusted and aroused.

Data above shows about Maya’s inner feelings when she remembers Tuyul as both disgusting and sexually attractive. Their relationship is not only involving physical activities, but also emotionally complex. The phrase “*mencampurkan birahi dan cemooh*” (mixed banter with his lust) creates a metaphor that combines desire and mockery, the opposite ideas.

The translator uses a paraphrase technique by translating “*mencampurkan birahi dan cemooh*” to “mixed banter with his lust.” The expression is changed into a more familiar phrase in English. The word *birahi* is translated as lust, while *cemooh* is translated into banter. *Cemooh* and banter are two different things.

This leads a metaphor shift. In the source text, *cemooh* refers to humiliation or degradation. So that, the word choice strengthens the sense of inequality and power imbalance. However, banter in English usually refers to playful teasing between two people. It caused a shift from harsh humiliation to a more neutral interaction. In addition, it also reduces the intensity of the power imbalance. As a result, even though the metaphor is still present, the nuance and underlying meaning are changed.

iii. Discursive Creation

ST: *Pentung yang mengacung itu menunjuk pada benda yang menimbulkan hasrat.*

TT: his erection proof that a special part of her could arouse desire

The data reflects Maya's understanding about her body. Maya's thought about her self-worth is stuck by her ability to arouse male sexual desire. Maya sees her body as something that can be judged merely based on how men respond to it. The phrase *pentung yang mengacung* reflects to a penis erection as a symbol of men's desire, which is then connected to a woman's ability to trigger desire.

Here, the translator uses discursive creation when translating "*pentung yang mengacung itu menunjuk pada benda yang menimbulkan hasrat*" into "his erection proof that a special part of her could arouse desire." The translator chose to create a new expression that makes the target text becomes bolder statement. As a result, it is caused a shifting in metaphor. Even though the meaning is still conveyed, the level of indirectness is reduced.

b. Non-metaphor

i. Explication

ST: *banyak gadis-gadis ranumnya senang dikawini oleh para buruh perminyakan.*

TT: **lusty young girls** was eager to have sex with the oil workers

The metaphor describes a social phenomenon in an oil industry setting, where young women are positioned in economic and sexual relations. The expression "*gadis-gadis ranumnya*" is a metaphor that associates young women with ripe fruit. It suggests sensual and sexual attractiveness in an implicit way. This metaphor conveys desire indirectly through the domain of fruit ripeness.

In this data, the technique of explication can be observed in the translation of "*gadis-gadis ranumnya*" into "lusty young girls." The translator makes the implicit meaning explicit by mentioning the word **lusty**, which directly refers to sexual desire. Thus, the metaphorical meaning in the source text is transformed into a more direct and explicit expression in the target language.

As a result, this caused a shift from metaphor to non-metaphor. In the source text, female attractiveness is represented through the metaphor of ripeness. On the other hand, in the target language it is

reduced to a direct description of desire. This shift reflects a movement from implicit conceptual mapping to explicit expression, which is removing the metaphorical layer present in the source text.

ii. Discursive Creation

ST: *Seorang laki-laki seperti dia mestinya menikah dengan perawan yang manis, tetapi dia mengawini seorang janda*

TT: A man like him should have married a nice virgin, but he married a widow.

The context of data above is talking about Laila's perspective on Sihar's marriage. It conveys that women are often evaluated based on socially constructed standards. "*Perawan yang manis*" is associated with the ideal woman, which is considered innocent, attractive, and aligned with patriarchal expectations. This expression contains a metaphor that links female characteristics with sensory experience (sweetness), mapping personal traits onto the domain of taste.

In this data, the technique of discursive creation can be seen in the translation of "*perawan yang manis*" into "a nice virgin." The translator does not convey the metaphorical element related to taste but replaces it with the more general and descriptive word, 'nice.' This shows a reinterpretation that does not follow the metaphorical structure of the source text. As a result, there is a shift from metaphor to non-metaphor. In the source text, female characteristics are understood through a conceptual mapping of taste. Meanwhile in the target text, the translator is represented directly as a general attribute (nice) without metaphorical association. This shift removes the sensory dimension of the metaphor, resulting in a flatter meaning that no longer conveys the same conceptual meaning.

c. Shift in Metaphor Vehicle (*ChatGPT*)

i. Established Equivalence

ST: *tanpa berpikir bahwa perempuan-perempuan itu juga telah menaklukkan mereka dengan bokong dan tetek bengeknya. Asu.*

TT: without thinking that those women had also conquered them with their sagging hips and heaving breasts. Damn.

The data is the expression of Shakuntala's anger towards Sihar who always twists the truth about Laila. Sihar, in front of his friends, claims that Laila is the one chasing him. In fact, Sihar is the one who always gives Laila a hope. She then reverses the idea that man actually is able to be conquered by women. The phrase "*menaklukkan dengan*

bokong dan tetek bengeknya" (conquered them with their sagging hips and heaving breasts) reflects a stereotype about women which reduces them to their physical appearance.

ChatGPT adapts established equivalent in translating source text into target text. *Menaklukkan* are translated as conquered and the references of female body are expressed through hips and breasts. Overall, the structure and basic meaning of metaphor are kept in target text. However, there is a shift in the metaphor. In the source text, "tetek bengek" has a dismissive tone and creating a degrading image of the female body. In contrast, the translation "heaving breasts" sounds more sensual. This change shifts the representation of the female body from something harsh and dismissive to something more visual and erotic. So, even though the metaphor is still there, its nuance and underlying meaning have changed.

Discussion

The results show that metaphor translation between human translators and *ChatGPT* tend to show different patterns. Human translators usually try to keep the metaphorical meaning by changing the metaphors' form. However, sometimes the human translators turn metaphors into non metaphor. In contrast, *ChatGPT* tends to use fixed equivalents with little variation. As a conclusion, it proves that human translation is more flexible and interpretative, while machine translation is more stable and predictable.

The findings are inline with earlier studies which see that translation loss sometimes happen as a natural part of translation process. For example, research on Qur'an translation shows that translation loss can happen at different levels due to linguistic and cultural gaps (Abdelkarim et al., 2025b). Similarly, a study on humor translation in American sitcoms shows that elements like tone, relationships between characters and emotional effect are often lost when translation focuses too much on literal meaning or formal structure (Ali et al., 2025). Those research support the findings that stated when metaphors change or disappear, it is not merely affecting the linguistic meaning, but also the experiential aspects.

Metaphor is fragile elements in translation, because metaphor is often simplified, omitted, or changed in structure (Gabdkarimova et al., 2026; Oleniak, 2025). However, this study goes further by showing that whether a metaphor is kept or changed in its form (metaphor vehicle), metaphor can still convey its conceptual meaning. This indicates that metaphor loss is not only absolute, but also can occur more subtly through changes in how the conceptual meaning is restructured.

Next, the findings confirm the study from Sega' Kendenan et al. (2025) that stated the translation techniques choice are directly linked either to shift or to loss. This study finds that discursive creation and explication lead the change of metaphors into non-metaphors. Meanwhile, established equivalent and paraphrase tend to preserve metaphor, even they change the conceptual domains.

From a wider perspective, the differences between human and machine translation found in this study are similar to patterns found in Aranberri & Pascual (2025), which shows that machine translation often produces more patterned and less detailed language. In contrast, human translators, as shown in B. Zhang & Mo (2025), play an active role to shape the meaning by making choices such as omitting, replacing, or rephrasing certain metaphorical expressions.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that metaphor often changes or loses in translation. It happens in both human and *ChatGPT* translation. However, while human translators try to keep metaphor, even if they change the forms, *ChatGPT* mostly uses simple and common linguistic patterns. As a result, the human translators' products tend to keep more meaning while *ChatGPT* often makes the text flatter.

This study also confirms that metaphor loss is not merely talking about a linguistic issue. It is a complex outcome from translation techniques, structural constraints, and ideological processes. It also extends previous studies that translation often involves loss and shift at many levels. In addition, the findings confirm that translation is not neutral as changes in metaphor can affect how women and their experiences are represented. This highlights the importance of considering both cognitive and ideological dimensions in analyzing translation, especially in texts where metaphor plays a central role in meaning construction.

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