Translating Myself and Others

LAHIRI, JHUMPA. (2023). *Translating Myself and Others.* Princeton University Press.

Reviewed by CHANDRANI CHATTERJEE

Jhumpa Lahiri needs no introduction to readers of literature. Her fictional world traverses a wide range of possibilities - from the diasporic experience to questions of gender and translation. In *Translating Myself and Others*, Lahiri humanises translation by locating it not just in the domain of academic discourse but in the realm of the experiential. Her journeys in Bengali, English and Italian and the dilemmas as a translator and creative writer are explored in this wonderfully lucid work of nonfiction. Divided into ten chapters apart from an introduction and an afterword, this book provides a glimpse into the many facets of the craft of translation and the entangled personal journeys therein. It may not be incorrect to suggest that Lahiri theorises translation through the anecdotal. In reading the book, one is reminded of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous comment on translation being the most intimate act of reading where the personal and the political become indistinguishable.

> "A translation dilemma is among my earliest memories" is how Lahiri begins narrating personal everyday incidents that went into the making of her relationship to translation and its ubiquitous presence in her life. Lahiri goes on to enunciate the integral role that translation has played in her life and writing career highlighting the shifting linguistic landscapes that inform her creative imagination. She writes, "The current volume gathers together my written thoughts about translation over the past seven years. I have spent these years teaching creative writing and translation at Princeton University, but before I came to Princeton I was living in Rome, where my linguistic landscape dramatically transformed, and Italian emerged like a new island in an archipelago, just as Ovid describes in the Metamorphosis: "and what deep water had covered/ now

> emerges as mountains, dotting the sea with more Cyclades." (p. 3).

The following chapters elaborate on the notion of an intimate yet troubled relationship with Italian and the ways in which this would further Lahiri's understanding of language, society and culture and the many nuances therein.

Acquiring a foreign language at an adult age and then writing in that language poses many challenges. Lahiri builds on some of these in discussing translation and its metaphoric nature in the making of identities. In the chapter titled 'Why Italian?', Lahiri states:

> "The question has led to a realization: that while the desire to learn a new language is considered admirable, even virtuous, when it comes to writing in a new language, everything changes. Some perceive this desire as a transgression, a betrayal, a deviation. What I did - distancing myself suddenly from English, passing precipitously into Italian - tends to trigger resistance, diffidence, and doubts." (p. 10).

Elaborating on her growing bond with the Italian language, Lahiri accepts its foreignness and yet acknowledges the many ways in which languages seep into us, making us who we become, transforming and altering us in many ways. This for Lahiri also becomes the path to creativity and longing.

> "But a language, even a foreign language, is something so intimate that it enters inside of us despite the fissure. It becomes a part of our body, our soul. It takes root in the brain, it emerges from our mouths. In time, it nestles in the heart. The graft that I've made puts a new language into circulation, instills new thoughts within me." (p. 21).

The metaphor of grafting is interestingly worked out in the book and becomes a way of engaging with the concept of belonging in language. The belongingness in an 'adopted language' is also marked by the many anxieties that characterise it. Lahiri is candid in admitting these and also the desire to belong. "I continue to admit that Italian is not my language, that it's an adopted language [...] A graft can save a life, but the first phase of the process, characterized

by fragility, is full of uncertainty. [...] Now that I'm grafted onto Italian, I still worry. I do all I can to reinforce the connection. [...] I fear that if the graft is not sufficiently secure, it will rupture." (p. 22).

In the chapters that follow, Lahiri takes us through a rich variety of texts and concepts in elaborating on the craft of translation.

In the chapter titled 'An Ode to the Mighty Optative: Notes of a Would-be Translator' Lahiri engages with the Aristotelian notions of poetry and history both as a creative writer and a translator. Referring to two different sections of Aristotle's *Poetics* and a critical engagement with the verb 'should' across various disciplines, Lahiri comments, "My role on the panel was to weigh in as a writer. But, being a translator as well, I was curious to consider alternate English versions of these citations, and felt that I should also put my ancient smattering of ancient Greek to the test. That the result of my investigations has both clarified and complicated my relationship to what Aristotle is saying about the distinction between poetry and history does not surprise me; this is always the case when we step outside of any given language and venture into another." (p. 61).

Taking the reader through the several renditions of the Aristotelian passage in question, Lahiri illustrates the need to acknowledge plausibilities rather than strictures in translation.

> "Translation is about choosing, at times wisely, at times reluctantly, always with lingering misgiving (and here it is opportune to recall that in Latin, *optare* means both to choose and to wish). Translation generates innumerable "mights" and relatively few "shoulds", causing meaning to keep leaning, like a boat on swelling seas, from one side to another." (p. 69).

The question of plurality in translation keeps recurring in the book as a refrain in different contexts and examples. In the chapter on self-translation titled 'Where I Find Myself', Lahiri narrates her reluctance to go back to English after having written the novel *Dove mi trovo* in Italian. The transition to English would need a real shift in the space and linguistic landscape as well. Lahiri reminisces thus, "I was still in Rome - a place where I feel no inspiration to work out

of Italian into English - when I came to my decision. When living and writing in Rome, I have an Italian center of gravity. I needed to move back to Princeton, where I am surrounded by English, where I miss Rome. Italian translation has always been for me to maintain contact with the language I love when I am far away from it. To translate is to alter one's linguistic coordinates, to grab on to what has slipped away, to cope with exile." (pp. 74-75).

Ruminating on the process of self-translation, Lahiri notices the possibility of change that the self undergoes: "I suppose the exhilarating aspect of translating myself was being constantly reminded, as I changed the words from one language to another, that I myself had changed so profoundly, and that I was capable of such change. I realized that my relationship to the English language, thanks to my linguistic graft, had also been irrevocably altered." (pp. 80-81).

Translating *Dove mi trovo* into English was indeed a process of transformation, and as Lahiri notes, "[...] That original book, which now feels incomplete to me, stands in line behind its English-language counterpart. Like an image viewed in the mirror, it has turned into the simulacrum, and both is and is not the starting point for what rationally and irrationally followed." (p. 85).

In chapter seven titled 'Substitution: Afterword to Trust by Domenico Starnone', Lahiri begins by emphasising the crucial role of substitution in translation, "To write, first and foremost, is to choose the words to tell a story, whereas to translate is to evaluate, acutely, each word an author chooses." (p. 86).

Building the discourse around the word *invece* in Italian, which occurs several times in Starnone's novel and is a familiar word in Italian, meaning instead, Lahiri suggests, "In other words, I believe that *invece,* a trigger for substitution, is a metaphor for translation itself." (p. 87).

Further commenting on the ever-changing nature of language, meaning and life, Lahiri poignantly drives home the essence of translation being in its ability to transform and alter meaning.

> "It is my engagement with Starnone's texts over the past six years that has rendered me, definitively, a translator,

> and this novel activity in my creative life has rendered clear the inherent instability not only of language but of life, which is why, in undertaking the task of choosing English words to take the place of his Italian ones, I am ever thankful and forever changed." (p. 97).

The chapter on Calvino, titled 'Calvino Abroad', opens up the discussion around world literature and the fact that we have always found access to these writers and their works through translation. "To speak of Italo Calvino's popularity outside of Italy is to speak of Calvino in translation, given that he has been read and loved abroad in other languages and not in Italian." (p. 141). The fact that Calvino becomes the author who he is in different languages becomes perhaps the apt metaphor for the translator's task as a traveller. Lahiri's exploration of Calvino's craft goes beyond an assessment of Calvino the writer to Calvino the translator. As Lahiri reminds us, "Remember that he wrote his most mature works - those that were most celebrated, and therefore most widely translated - in France while experiencing, willfully, a fertile state of linguistic exile. He was the translator of Raymond Queneau, a French writer known for his linguistic whimsy [...]" (p. 142).

In the afterword 'Translating Transformation', Lahiri interweaves academic anecdotes about co-teaching and later translating Ovid's *Metamorphosis* with her colleague; the personal ones of her mother's declining health and death; with those of the world crisis of the 2020 pandemic. Lahiri reminds us that Ovid's poem is about change and transformation - alteration and re-assimilation. In coping with her mother's failing health, *Metamorphosis* acquired new meanings - "In the face of death, the transformation in the poem now assumed a new shade of meaning. Though certain beings do die in Ovid, the vast majority cease to be one thing but become something else. I was convinced that it was the inevitable passage from life to death that Ovid was recounting and representing again and again in order to enable us, his readers, to bear the inevitable loss of others." (p. 153).

What could be a more appropriate way to describe the ubiquity and inevitable presence of translation in our lives than through the entangled nature of life and death that is invoked in Ovid's

Metamorphosis? *Translating Myself and Others* takes us on a poetic journey of our ephemeral and transforming selves, which we often encounter in and through language and translations. Lahiri's lucid and contemplative style, immersed in the process of discovering and renewing her creative self, becomes a testimony of 'living in translation' - a condition that perhaps would resonate with most of us.

References

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