

## Fascinating Facets of Translation

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### Bibliographic Information:

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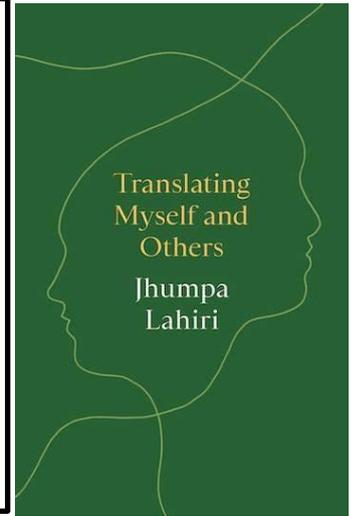
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### Abstract

This essay reviews Jhumpa Lahiri's book *Translating Myself and Others* (2022), published by Princeton University Press. Using a wide range of examples, both contemporary and classical, Lahiri offers a remarkable theory of translation. Whereas the book cites several western sources as the book engages with the Italian and the English language, its explicit focus on the theme of translation recalls the notion of dhvani that is central to Sanskrit literature.

**Keywords:** Translation, Language, Belonging, Identity, Migration, Dhvani

*Translating Myself and Others* is a deep meditation on the art of translation. In the opening chapter, Jhumpa Lahiri tells the reader about her early life, different locations and languages that shaped her, and about her obsession with the Italian language. Examining her personal struggles and citing examples from literature, Lahiri sets out to answer the question: "Why Italian?," a question that follows her everywhere. The "why" part of any question that concerns choice, desire, or love always lands the one being questioned in deep waters. 'Why-questions' at some level are also violent. Lahiri is often asked: "Why do you speak our language?" (9), or "Why Italian instead of an Indian language,

a closer language, more like you?" (10). Such questions surprise her because she herself has not considered them. Although Lahiri explicitly refers to the gender dimension of such probes, she merely implies their racial side. In deconstructing these questions, Lahiri plunges into illuminating thoughts and ideas and taking the reader along with her.

Lahiri positions herself as a writer who has been traversing between languages, cultures, and places, and thus always translating from an early age. Accordingly, a question like "Why Italian," although disrupting, is not entirely new for her, but rather, an extension of similar questions that are frequently posed to cultural, linguistic, and sexual minorities. While reading her defense, I wondered why Lahiri feels the need to respond to why-questions that are so casually put to her, often if not always based on ignorance or perhaps jealousy. However, Lahiri's engagement with "Why Italian" is not merely about linguistic transgression, but it is about choice, language, and ownership. And thus, her concern exceeds the merely personal. She admits that Italian is not her language and that she does not possess it. She also asks, "Who possesses a language, and why? Is it a question of lineage? Mastery? Use? Affect? Attachment? What does it mean, in the end, to belong to a language?" (22) Asking such questions, Lahiri emphasizes that questions about language are ultimately questions of selfhood, identity, and thus existence.

Moving further into the book, Lahiri writes about the Italian novelist Domenico Starnone, a writer whose work she admires and translates, highlighting what translation demands and what it can achieve. Reflecting on words such as *trezzare* (joking), *vuoto* (emptiness), and *buio* (darkness) in the context of translation, Lahiri offers a fruitful reading of Starnone's two novels *Ties* and *Tricks*. Lahiri reads the novel *Ties* through the figures of literary and symbolic "containers" that hold precious things, house secrets, and keep things from dispersing or disappearing. But containers, Lahiri points out, can also imprison, ensnare, and limit. And, that a translated text is also a kind of container that both holds and transforms the original text. Concerning her translation of Starnone's novel *Tricks*, Lahiri notes, "Starnone's text remains the parent that spawned this translation, but somewhere along the road to its English incarnation, it also became a ghost" (43). Lahiri shows the reader repeatedly that writing is tough, but translating is tougher. If Lahiri feels enamored by Starnone's ability to play with words, she herself is no stranger to the creative use of words. She knows how to tease out words and release their potential with finesse.

Throughout the book, Lahiri uses medical and material metaphors such as "graft" and "door" to describe her relationship with translation. If a successful graft can prolong life and create

something beautiful, an unsuccessful one can deform the body into which graft is inserted. As for doors, they function as a barrier but also as a point of entry. It is via talking about "doors" that Lahiri offers a definitive but also slightly defensive answer to the question "Why Italian." She states, "I don't wish to live, or write, in a world without doors. An unconditional opening, without complications or

obstacles, does not stimulate me. Such a landscape, without closed spaces, without secrets, without the presence of the unknown, would have no significance or enchantment for me" (16). Such personally experienced ruminations over the practice of translation reveal what translation involves. They also reveal, as in the last sentence of the quotation, how questions of "language" segue or translate from mundane to mystical realms.

Lahiri's partly theoretical and partly personal essay on Antonio Gramsci is impressive for its form, as it never loses its grip on the theme of translation. Those unfamiliar with Gramsci's work can start here. The chapter is divided into several subsections with headings like "Translation Journey," "Double Identity," "Echo," "Original," "Mutation," each offering some aspect of translation in Gramsci's work. The Italian word *traduzione*, or translation, is an example. Lahiri points out that, in Gramsci, the Italian word *traduzione* has a second meaning: it refers to the transportation of individuals who are detained. Making similar insights, she brings out the nuanced, relational, and inclusive aspects involved in the act of translation. As a writer-translator, Lahiri knows where to look in Gramsci's journals. In the section titled "Voice," Lahiri notes how, within the same day, Gramsci's writing changes from light to dark, from mundane concerns to haunting reflections, depending upon to whom he is writing. She describes Gramsci's ability to change gears and engage with multiple realities, and at the same time wonders what kinds of challenges such qualities may pose for his translators. She notes, "This would be the greatest challenge for the translator: to give voice, in another language, to each of Gramsci's individual voices" (121). Such reflections on the much-ignored art of translation that Lahiri identifies in Gramsci's work are strewn all over *Translating Myself and Others*.

The concept of "echo" that seems central to translation surfaces throughout the book. The chapter "In Praise of Echo" delves deeper into the meaning and centrality of echo to translation. Lahiri offers a fascinating study of Ovid's poem *Metamorphoses* through the mythical figures of Echo and Narcissus, drawing unexpected parallels between translator and Echo: like the translator who follows the original text, Echo chases Narcissus in the poem. Translation and love involve intense passion and complete devotion. In order to translate, one enters into a relationship with the original text and seeks to know it intimately. Lahiri writes, "One of the conditions of this relationship is the act of following, of being second and not first. Like Echo, who in Ovid, 'sees and burns for Narcissus, furtively following his tracks.'" (48). A translator as well follows the tracks of the original work with Echo-like zeal. Both the translator and Echo emerge as figurative "hunters" (49). Commenting further on Echo and translator's role, Lahiri writes "Though Echo's hunt ends in failure, she helps us to better appreciate the translator's contradictory role as someone who both comes second and exercises a certain degree of power in the course of wrestling a text into a new language" (49). Drawing such profound parallels between two very different entities, Lahiri foregrounds translation. Almost everything that Lahiri says about echo in the context of translation recalls the theory of *dhvani*, meaning echo in Sanskrit, espoused by Bharata Muni and later by the 9th-century Kashmiri poet

Abhinavgupta. Lahiri's observation that "far from a restrictive act of copying, a translator restores the meaning of a text by means of an elaborate, alchemical process that requires imagination, ingenuity, and freedom" (47). And, that the translated text must echo the original text, the first principle of the subject of translation is what the notion of dhvani means in Sanskrit literature. Apart from mentioning the Bengali language, her Bengali parents, and the problem of narrating her Bengali characters in English, Lahiri's book swims in a range of western concepts, myths, languages, and literary works; and, yet dhvani shapes her formulations on translation.

Lahiri's passionate account of translation becomes most endearing in the section called "Afterward." Throughout the book, Lahiri either defends her choice to write in Italian or talks about the works of other authors. However, *Afterward* shows Lahiri's writerly side most powerfully; it

dissolves boundaries between translation theory, personal narrative, and what constitutes fiction, thus cogently highlighting the finer aspects of translation with which the book engages in the previous chapters. Combining discursive eloquence with emotional power and erudition with stillness, Lahiri offers an insight into her relationship with her mother, some glimpses into her family life as well as her association with her colleagues at Princeton. Lahiri subtly weaves different aspects of her life from the pandemic to the studies of her son, her mother's death, and Ovid in ways that give extraordinarily nuanced meaning to translation that manifests in life as change, but also as various things that seem different but are underneath connected. Lahiri's poignant mediation on her mother's death evokes Walter Benjamin's ruminations on translation—on his idea of "the pure language that emphasizes the inherent oneness of all languages. She brings Ovid, her mother's slowly dissolving body, plants, and her own body on the same plane, each different but interacting with one another: one is comprehended in the light of the other. The personal references about her family and her own journey as a writer with which she begins the book become more elaborate in the *Afterward*: she talks about her son, parents, the birth of her sister, and the Hindu concept of incarnation. Although Lahiri does not explicitly address it, it is via dhvani, perhaps subconsciously, that she brings the disparate worlds of Bengali, English, and Italian and of Sanskrit and Latin literature via notions of echo or dhvani into harmony and communion.

The best parts of the book are those where Lahiri talks about her own struggles with language, demonstrating that questions of language are ultimately questions of life. The least attractive part of the book is where she brings in voices that question her choices. Without pushing the reader under cumbersome theories, Lahiri offers a straightforward but profound and lyrical theory of translation. She moves seamlessly between languages and the works of writers such as Ovid, Gramsci, and Calvino. Subtly, the book also comments on the present-day world, or perhaps all worlds in historical time, which is structured in ways that different people experience it differently. If for some the world is easy to navigate, for most there are doors, delays, waiting rooms, and bureaucratic impositions. One can stop and ask a working writer who holds multiple languages and identities why-questions,

but cannot predetermine their outcome. In Lahiri's case, 'questions' and 'doors' do the opposite: they open up spaces in which new ideas dwell and flourish.

**Author Bio:** Lucky Issar is an independent researcher and literary scholar. He holds a PhD from Freie Universität Berlin. His research interests include gender and queer studies and queer theory that focuses on India. He is working on a book titled *Narratives of Queer Desire in Modern Indian Fiction*. He has contributed scholarly articles, essays, and book reviews to various publications such as the journals *Literature and Theology*, *Victorian Review*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Studies in Popular Culture*.