

Translating the Margins: An Interview with V. Ramaswamy-the Translator Spy

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V. Ramaswamy (b.1960) is a non-fiction writer and literary translator based in Kolkata. Since 1984, he has been working as an activist for the rights of labouring poor in his home city. Consequently, Ramaswamy's non-fiction foregrounds themes that are related to the life of workers, squatters, health and sanitation, poverty, slums, resettlement, and so on –from the grassroots. However, the main concern in this dialogic article is to trace Ramaswamy's journey as a translator of the marginal and suppressed voices. Since 2005, Ramaswamy is continuously engaged in 'committed' translations of Subimal Misra – a Bangla anti-establishment, experimental and maverick writer. For the uninitiated, trials and tribulations of the downtrodden and the suppressed primitive desires of the human psyche are the prominent themes in Misra's literary ecosystem. Courtesy of Ramaswamy's masterful translations, already spanning three volumes, Misra has acquired a new life –an 'afterlife' in the English world. Besides Misra, Ramaswamy has also translated other noted Bangla writers such as Manoranjan Byapari, Adhir Biswas, and Shahidul Zahir. But again, the connecting link among all these writers is their concerns and empathy for the margins that Ramaswamy has tapped. The conversation seeks to ask and answer, though not limited to: what is it to translate the margins? What is the role of a translator during such transactions? What strategies does a translator employ while negotiating complex narratives pertaining to the margins? Can a translator be called a 'cultural spy'?

In addition to the questions posed above, the conversation explores the possibilities inherent in collaborative translations, and the necessity to take the local (Bangla) to the global (English). Further, the discussion grounds how the recovery of local narratives in English translations vis-à-vis Bangla brings 'new' knowledge and makes a strong case to address questions of identity, violence, caste,

sexuality, and marginality in the periphery of the post-colonial nation like India. The conversation will be valuable source material for scholars and practitioners of translation and a working template for those working in/with the margins, especially in the south Asian context.

Utsarga Ghosh (UG) and Umesh Kumar (UK): Mr. Ramaswamy, how and when did you enter the field of translation?

V. Ramaswamy (VR): My entry into translation was accidental, and serendipitous. My awareness regarding Bangla literature was almost zero. All my reading from my childhood onwards was in English, i.e. fiction and literature, and non-fiction, in the English language, or in English translation. As I was never a student of Literature, my reading was entirely for pleasure and for learning, and extremely eclectic. However, notwithstanding my ignorance regarding Bangla literature, I was intimately connected with Bengali society, culture, history and politics. That was occasioned by my entry into public activism in 1984, through involvement in the movement¹ against squatter evictions in Calcutta, which began the process of my making common cause with the downtrodden and oppressed folk of my city (Golden Gandhi “P.S. Section”). That process culminated in my establishing a grassroots organisation in a century-old jute worker’s settlement in Howrah, of mostly Muslim, Urdu-speaking labouring people, and mentoring the youth of the community towards awareness, capabilities and leadership for community advancement.

In 2005, my friend Mrinal Bose² casually mentioned the name of Subimal Misra to me, and that’s when I heard it for the first time. For no reason at all, I responded saying I would translate him. After that he kept prodding and pushing me to begin. So I bought some of Misra’s books, and on the day of Dashami – the last day of Durga

¹ During 1980s, the future of squatters in Calcutta was at stake due to the initiation of an eviction drive by the state government. In 1984, Chhinnamul Sramajibi Adhikar Samiti or Organization for the Rights of Uprooted Labouring People was established in protest and resistance against evictions.

² Dr. Mrinal Bose is a physician and novelist who lives in Sukchar, in the northern fringe of Kolkata.

Puja – that year, I picked up the Bangla volume *Anti-Golpo Songroho* or Anti-Story Collection (1999) and read and then translated the first story – Haran Majhi (Chandra). And thus I began reading his ‘anti-stories’ – and simultaneously translating them. I also gathered all the books by and about him that I could. I was truly fortunate that Misra entertained me, a complete stranger, and gave me his consent. Perhaps the fact that I was a Tamilian, and his discovery of my make-up and something about me in the course of our subsequent conversations (entirely over the phone), intrigued and tickled him! Reading Misra was an entirely new experience for me. It was like the opening up of a new horizon, of hitherto unimagined dimensions. His use of cinematic techniques like montage, jump shot, or collage in literary texts, for instance; or his internalization of literary masters like Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Proust, or Mann, endowing him with kaleidoscopic knowledge – amazed me. I thought Misra ought to be known beyond Bangla as well. That was the beginning of my initiation into the Subimal Misra translation journey (Ramaswamy).

UG and UK: You have been translating for close to two decades now. How do you view your journey as a translator so far? You must have gone through a certain transition in terms of selection of texts and the strategies you employed in rendering them into English?

VR: I rarely do anything by plan or strategy in my life! Things happen. The same applies to translation as well, I just do it spontaneously, but now there is also a reflexivity. Looking back, I see my journey as a translator unfolding through a few stages. In the initial period, this was just something interesting that I was doing, occasionally, on the side. That culminated in the publication of Misra’s *The Golden Gandhi Statue from America: Early Stories* (2010). But by then, my interest in Misra’s work had deepened, and I wanted to continue. I was selected for the Sangam House writers’ residency in Bangalore in early 2011, and that heralded the second phase of my journey as a translator. Actually, soon after I began translating Misra, I read Michael Hofmann’s essay “My Life with Roth”. Hofmann was the translator of Joseph Roth, the Austrian

writer. That planted seeds in my mind of a long-term Subimal Misra translation project (Hofmann). So now I was no longer an incidental translator but a serious one, and I began a multi-volume project of selecting and translating Misra's short fiction, covering his entire writing life. During this phase, I translated *Wild Animals Prohibited*, published in 2015, and *This Could Have Become Ramayan Chamar's Tale: Two Anti-Novels*, which came out in 2019. The third phase of my evolution as a translator was triggered by a personal tragedy, the death of my son Rituraj in 2013, at age 21. Translation turned out to be the means whereby I was able to combat chronic depression, which threatened to hurl me into the abyss. I was working on editing the final manuscript for the third Misra book then, and following that I began the fourth Misra book. Translation for me was a means of shutting the mind, and concentrating on words, meaning, and syntax, something akin to meditation (Wild Animals 234).

While working on the fourth and final Subimal Misra volume, I began thinking about which author I ought to take up now. I had also come to view myself as a translator of 'voices from the margins', and so it was with such antennae that I now moved (The Nemesis). And thus I established contact with Manoranjan Byapari, and in early 2016 he gave me his epic novel, *Chandal Jibon*, to translate. That was translated into two volumes, *The Runaway Boy* (2020) and *The Nemesis* (forthcoming). It was while working on *Chandal Jibon* that I had my first experience of unending labour, which must be the true test of a translator. I had joked about this to friends, saying it was like being asked by someone to start walking from Kolkata, and he would meet me in Delhi! Or like digging a pit endlessly! But I persisted, because I had committed myself to the work and so I had to see it through. This was the fourth stage of my journey as a translator.

Meanwhile, Adhir Biswas, an editor, publisher and writer, had requested me to translate his prize-winning book, *Allahr Jomite Paa (Setting Foot on Allah's Land)*. I began working on that in mid-2018, and then it turned out that the book was the first of a 4-part series, so I took up the subsequent three books as well in 2019. These books are a refugee's remembrance, of his lost village in East

Pakistan, and his poverty-stricken family's struggles to eke out a living and gain a toehold in the new country, India. Adhir Biswas' four books were published as a single volume, *Memories of Arrival: A Voice from the Margins*, in 2022. Once again, I had committed myself to the work, and so I had to see it through. My apprenticeship in unremitting labour served me well in this respect! (Modi).

In 2019, once again by sheer dint of circumstances, I was introduced to the name and work of the Bangladeshi writer, Shahidul Zahir. And soon after that, I lived for a fortnight in his books! Zahir was the first Bangla writer I read for the sheer joy of reading, the very first sentence of his magical prose that I read had me ensnared (*Life and Political 1*). That led to my beginning a three-volume project of translating Zahir. I like to think that this was my destiny, for in working on Zahir I entered the next, *zen* phase of translation, where there is no effort, only being and unfolding. The Zahir project also inaugurated for me the practice of collaboration in translation. I invited Shahroza Nahrin, a graduate student with an interest in translation, to join me in translating Shahidul Zahir's novella, *Life and Political Reality*. That was a happy and rich experience, and led to my realisation of another basic axiom in translation, that two is better than one. Shahroza and I then worked on another novella by Zahir, *Abu Ibrahim's Death*, and the book, *Life and Political Reality: Two Novellas* was published in 2022. With Shahroza preoccupied with her graduate studies at McGill University, I completed two more books of Zahir in 2021-22, a collection of ten short stories by him, and his novel, *I See the Face*. Both are forthcoming in 2022. After reading Zahir, I also initiated an engagement with Bangladesh, and have made regular visits there. The publication of three Zahir books in my translation in 2022 is my way of paying homage to the memory of Bangladesh's historic independence.

I continued with collaborative translation, and through 2021 I worked with Labani Jangi to translate *The Song of the Faraway Village (Goi-Geramer Panchali)*, by Ansaruddin. The author is a marginal farmer from Nadia district, in West Bengal – we are contemporaries – and he has been writing since 1990. I heard him speak at the People's Literary Festival in Kolkata in 2018, and then

established contact with him, and he gave me this book to translate, a collection of five essays, that looks at the rural Muslim life and milieu in West Bengal, and the transformations therein since the author's childhood – a subject mostly absent in literary production in West Bengal. Working with Labani was also a very satisfying experience. The work was difficult in parts, demanding patience and persistence. But we saw it through. A leading publisher will be bringing the book out in the near future.

In July 2021, I learnt the name of the writer Ismail Darbesh and his first novel, *Talashnama* from an article written by a friend. The author is from a family of *ostagars*, or garment-makers. Ismail handles the marketing aspect of the family business – and writes. I obtained his novel and proposed it to my publisher, who agreed at once. I will begin work on that soon.

As I mentioned earlier, it was the Sangam House residency that made me a literary translator. And I have been fortunate to attend a few other residencies as well. I was at Ledig House in the USA in 2015, at the Toji Cultural Centre in Korea in 2015 and again in 2019, at Aberystwyth University in Wales in 2016, and was hosted by the University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh (ULAB) in Dhaka in 2020. I was able to advance in my translation work only because of these residencies (Wild Animals xi).

The identity that I now profess is that of a translator. But I also have another identity, I look after my family business, a small engineering factory. If not for this enterprise, started by my late father in 1967, with which I began my engagement in the early 2000s, I would not have been in the situation of taking up and then devoting myself assiduously to translating Bangla voices from the margins. It enabled me to become an independent translator. Similarly, a person who is driven to do such things would definitely pose a challenge to his next-of-kin, or spouse. So, my translation practice also owes to my wife's unstated support (Mokashi-Punekar 164).

UG and UK: Misra is difficult to read even for the Bangla readers. How difficult /easy has been to render him into English? Did your own identity as a Tamil migrant in Bengal play any role in these transactions?

VR: Subimal Misra is not an easy writer. The kind of allusions and intertextuality that one encounters in his works pose a humongous challenge. In other words, a ‘total’ Subimal Misra reader, if at all, would be a special creature. Naturally, the problem of/in reading is also the problem that one encounters when one attempts to translate him. My reading was always carried with a translator’s lens. My method of translating Subimal has always been from the vantage point of words and sentences, language and popular meaning (Mokashi-Punekar 168).

I am neither a scholar of literature, nor a scholar of translation studies. I am just a reader of literature, and when it comes to translation, it is ‘language’ that I engage with, not ‘literature’. I mean I try to ‘understand’, transparently, what something means, what it is that is being said, while also observing ‘how’ it is said, what kind of word is being used, what kind of speech is employed, what, for instance, is the sociological dimension (Two Anti-novels x).

As much of Subimal’s writing deals with people on the margins and their plight, a translator also needs to distance himself from the elitist Bengali mindset and get deeply involved with an alternative Bengali culture and language associated with the downtrodden (Velayudhan 170). To put it differently, it would be difficult and frustrating for someone to translate Subimal with only a rudimentary knowledge of Bangla. There are different dialects of Bengal³ and Bengali language (173).

³ Sukumar Sen and Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, two of the greatest linguists and historians of Bengali language, have broadly classified Bengali language into six dialects according to their regional usage variation. They are: Bangali, Rarhi, Varendri, Rangpuri, Manbhumi, and Sundarbani. However, there are dozens of local variations that exist within the above mentioned standardized dialects. For example, the dialect that Subimal often uses in his texts is called Dokkhina Bhasa, or Dokhni, a variant spoken in South Twenty-four Parganas district of West Bengal, the native place of a large section of Kolkata’s labouring population.

The translator must be embedded and alien at the same time, and thereby enable discernment and comprehension on the part of the ‘foreign’ reader. That is how I see it. As it happens, I am such an insider-outsider, on account of being a Tamil in Bengal. When it comes to Bangladesh, another dimension comes in, and as someone from West Bengal and India, everything seems new and different to my eyes and ears, which prompts thinking, and brings questions, conjecture and speculation to mind regarding ‘people’, ‘history’ and ‘culture’. And the key thing about Bangladesh is language. There are so many dialects, or local speeches, we should actually call them languages. Each language has its own sensibility, its own verve and pungency. Just like India is not one but multiple nations, Bengali in Bangladesh is not one but multiple languages. There is so much for writers to explore and experiment with, and likewise, so much for translators to do (Sarkar 205).

I am like a permanent spy in the Bengali world. Outsider, by ethnicity; insider by long standing geographical proximity and intimacy, married to a Bengali, fluent in the language, conscious of the historical, political, social, cultural, religious etc, always engaging with my environment, my city, its people; and so, always observing.

I see a huge transformation between the person I was and the translator that I have become between 2005 to 2022. This evolution has happened not only inside but also in the working approach that I have developed. In order to translate Subimal, I need to wear multiple hats, such as that of an anthologist, researcher, anthropologist, sociologist, besides being a translator (Wild Animals 222). It is because I am deeply embedded in life-culture in West Bengal, and owing to my activist engagement with my city that I translate. It is an act of translating culture; it is an activist’s engagement.

My grandfather’s job brought him to Calcutta in 1930, he was from the Tamil-speaking community in Kerala. However, as migrants, I recall distinctively that my family always reserved a deep respect for Bengali culture and tradition. For them, Bengal was a promised land, and they looked at it with awe and respect. Furthermore, my interest in social activism and subsequent marriage

into a Bengali family made me an almost-equal Bengali among native Bengalis. Now, moving to the literary front, more particularly with respect to writings in the Bengali language, publications, circulation, and the reading habits of the Bengali public, I began to realize that contemporary Bengali readership has little idea with regards to what is going on beyond commercial and canonical writers in Bangla. The alternative voices from the Bangla literary sphere that have hitherto been kept at the periphery for various reasons, need to be shared. Thus, when authors like Subimal, Manoranjan, Biswas or Zahir are available in English translation, they are as much a matter of discovery to the Bangla readership as it is to the outside world (Anantha Murthy 180). I see this discovery as a great reward for a translator.

UG and UK: Did you employ some specific strategies while translating Misra? What are the negotiations that you made with the original Bangla texts? Do you mind sharing some examples or anecdotes?

VR: Every translator has his/her own way of negotiating with the source text. I will share a few instances of those negotiations:

While translating Misra's story "Swaramelakalanidhi" (The Treasured Art of Vocal Harmony), I faced a peculiar problem. For some reasons, I couldn't tap the source inspiration that Subimal might have had while writing that story. However, a few months after I had submitted my manuscript to the publisher for the last Subimal volume, I attended an Indology lecture in Bangalore. While discussing temple architecture in Hampi, in Karnataka, a French Indologist mentioned the Sanskrit text, *Swaramelakalanidhi*⁴. While attending that lecture, I came to know how much this Sanskrit text has influenced Subimal. The incident left me both baffled and elated. Had I not attended the lecture, I would never have known that Subimal knew about these classical musical texts too!

⁴ Written by Ramamataya in the year 1550, *Swaramelakalanidhi* is a treatise on Vijayanagara musicology from the Post-Sangita Ratnakara period of South Indian music history. It is considered to be one of the most celebrated texts among Sangita Shastra Navaratnas of Carnatic Music theory.

Another major challenge for a translator is how and to what extent he is able to deal with the ambiguities of the source text. Dr. Mrinal Bose acted as a reviewer for the early drafts of my translation. It was he, who mentioned to me the name of Elfriede Jelinek, the Nobel Prize winning Austrian writer, as someone whose work resembled that of Subimal.

Translators might be doing their negotiations at multiple levels simultaneously. Like preparing a translation proposal, doing sample translations, going through the copy-editing or proofs from the publisher, editorial reviews of submitted translations etc. But translators like me also depend on a circle of family and friends. My aunts read some of my translations and made comments. A fellow-blogger friend painstakingly edited some of my early work. Friends keep me abreast about writers to look out for (Wild Animals 221).

What I'm trying to say is that a translator ought to be resourceful, imaginative and enterprising. He should keep his ears and eyes open. He ought to be receptive to any information that might help him render the text in the best possible manner. By the way, these shared ways of doing translation also shatter the myth that translation is an activity to be undertaken in isolation!

UG and UK: Do you ever seek a qualitative assessment of your translation output?

VR: Yes, I am always keen to receive critical feedback on my work. I send my work to people and solicit comments. But I also do not want to impose on anyone. Translation practitioners know that there is no perfect translation (Mokashi-Punekar 164). You can always improve upon a translation. To be honest, I have found errors in some of my translations, which could have been avoided. Perhaps, nobody noticed them. In such cases, I have requested the publisher to rectify them in subsequent editions. In *When Color is a Warning Sign* (1984/2019), Subimal quotes a few lines⁵ from Bishnu De's

⁵ Misra, Subimal. "When Colour is a Warning Sign". Two Anti-Novels, Harper Perennial, 2019, pp. 210.

poetry⁶. Even after repeated review and editing, I had missed an error in the poetry translation, and I noticed that in the final proof. I discussed those lines with a couple of poets in English who were Bengali. It is possible for a translator to be ignorant at one stage and wiser at the other. Translation is thus a continuous movement from ignorance to awareness.

UG and UK: Even a cursory look at your translation repertoire informs that you have been interested in a particular brand of writing. Do you also feel that? Is there a commonality in Subimal, Byapari, Adhir and Zahir?

VR: This question of yours makes me think about my own translation choices. As I said, I saw myself as translating voices from the margins, and these writers may be seen in those terms. Subimal deliberately stayed at the periphery, by choice, throughout his writing life, and sought to demolish all the canons of what is considered ‘writing’. Byapari was a marginal man by birth and by dint of his life circumstances – like being a rickshaw-puller, and later a cook – but his will to survive and overcome saw him attain glory and renown. Biswas, the son of a barber and a refugee, was defined by marginality for much of his life, which he embraced as his identity and retained even after having accomplished literary and publishing success. He is a keeper of subaltern memory. Zahir too, like Misra, chose to remain at the periphery, as far as the literary scene was concerned, and in his writing he looks at the common folk of his country. Even the writing of Ansaruddin⁷, who writes about the lives of rural Muslims in West Bengal, has been mostly unknown until recently. So translation critics might perhaps like to term me as a translator of the margins.

⁶ Bishnu Dey (1909-1982) is a Calcutta based Marxist Bengali poet from the post-Tagore era. A founding member of the Anti-Fascist Writers’ and Artists’ Association (1947), he won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1966 and Jnanpith Award in 1971.

⁷ Ansaruddin is a marginal farmer from Nadia district. He is best known for his novel, *Go Rakhaler Kothokota* (2015).

UG and UK: According to you, what are the major challenges that an independent translator encounters in the field of Indian translation? What is your opinion about the prospects of commissioned translation here?

VR: A potential (Indian) translator needs to have mastery over English and an equally strong footing in at least one Indian language – if one aspires to connect our local with the global and vice versa (Kumar 203). Besides, like any other good translator, s/he should possess a continuous learning orientation, openness to improvement, and an ethic of excellence. From such standards, it would seem, then, that a translator ought to be an extremely alert reader of the text, unlike the common reader. It is unfortunate that Bhasha literatures do not have the number of translators commensurate with the quantity of literatures produced in the Bhashas. There are many who have read Misra but only a minuscule will try to translate that experience into English or in other Indian languages. The sheer labor behind translation might be one of the reasons.

At the same time, there are some other challenges that a translator has to deal with. Taking into account the translation environment in India, I believe, most of the translators are not independent translators. A governmental institution like Sahitya Akademi promotes translations from regional languages into English. The modus operandi of this body is to select translators and commission them for different projects. These are called commissioned translations. However, due to lack of market strategy, pre-publication promotions, or post- publication evaluation and circulation, these translators remain away from the reader's reach.

There is yet another problem one encounters frequently if one decides to be an independent translator. Let us imagine a translator decides to translate a non-canonical Indian author. One is inevitably faced with commercial suspicion and editorial queries. In the beginning, I had to patiently explain to my editor the powerful nature of Subimal Misra's literary repertoire. I am an independent translator. However, I do not demean the role of a commissioned translation as well. Having a translation is always better than not having one.

Most of all, it would be difficult for someone to make a living in India as a literary translator. So naturally, there would be very few people who are driven to translate because they must.

UG and UK: Is there a specific translation methodology you follow? What would be your suggestion for the budding translators who aspire to translate complex and challenging writers like Misra?

VR: During my earlier translations, I never felt the need for collaboration. However, while translating Shahidul Zahir, I collaborated with Shahroza Nahrin⁸. Having now been part of both solo and collaborative exercise in translation, I believe that collaboration is important. I think it would be a meaningful exercise more particularly in dealing with complex writers such as Misra.

I remember Keki Daruwalla⁹ forbade me once from making word to word translation and recommended sense to sense instead. Nevertheless, as far as Subimal and Shahidul's texts are concerned, the translator shouldn't add or subtract anything of his/her own. These are highly evolved and crafted works of art. Therefore, you have to stretch the limits of English as much as possible to accommodate the style and idiosyncrasies of the original.

Rhetorically one can ask –is translation just a matter of rendering words into another language for which you can use Google Translate (internet) and a dictionary? We should keep in mind that we are translating a culture. Can one translate a culture with the rudimentary knowledge of the language? One should be deeply embedded in that culture as a participant and observer before attempting any translation. Otherwise it would be a fraud.

UG and UK: Do you mind giving a few more examples?

VR: *Madankatkati*¹⁰ is the first story of the collection *Kath Khay Angra Hage* (Eat Wood Shit Charcoal) by Subimal. When I was in

⁸ A Bangladeshi translator, studying in Canada.

⁹ Keki N. Daruwalla (born 1937) is an Indian English poet and short story writer. He received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1984 for his poetry collection *The Keeper of the Dead*.

¹⁰ Madankatkati or Monakka is a famous snack of Bengal, made of flour.

Korea in 2015 and about to translate it, it came to my notice that he had changed the name of the story in another collection and published it as *Mahanirgronthiya* (The Great Renunciant). I misread it as *Mahanigranthyia* and it was much later that I discovered my error.

Let me share another experience. In the story *Calcutta Dateline*, there is a scene of an adivasi festival where someone is playing the Dhamsa¹¹. An adivasi song is being sung in a frenzy of intoxication. While translating that piece, I was wearing just a gamchha (do we need to give a footnote on the meaning of Gamchha??) around my waist, and imagined the melody and beat to which the song was being sung, and began swaying to that beat – and rendered the English in that state. These are moments which can be called living in/through translation.

In another instance, *Kokire Lonang Korar Moto* (Like Netting a Babe?), Misra uses both Sadhu Bhasha¹² and Chalit Bhasha¹³. How do you render these two registers differently in translation? How do you render dialects? In the *Golden Gandhi Statue from America*, I tried to invent a pidgin for a dialect, which went terribly wrong. So the only creative response that I could think of now is to transcribe the dialect into Roman and reproduce it along with the English translation. In Shahidul Zahir's *Jibon O Rajnoitik* (Life and Political Reality), I provided Roman transcription and English translation to all the direct speeches, which are in Dhakai Bangla –a dialect of Bangladesh.

Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks to V. Ramaswamy for his patience and time. The recorded file of the interview is with Utsarga Ghosh.

¹¹ Dhamsa is a tribal musical instrument similar to drum.

¹² A sophisticated variation of Bengali, used by the upper class elites for writing literature. It consists of Sanskrit-derived vocabulary mostly.

¹³ A variation of Bengali language, used for daily purposes by commoners. It consists of more recent and colloquial idioms.

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Cite this Work:

Ghosh, Utsarga & Kumar, Umesh. 2023. Translating the Margins: An Interview with V. Ramaswamy-the Translator Spy. *Translation Today*, Vol. 17(1). 157-172.
DOI: 10.46623/tt/2023.17.1.in1