

THE BOOK REVIEW

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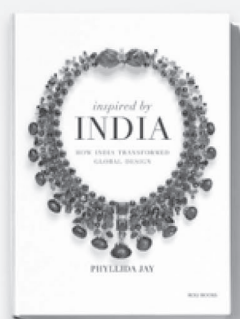
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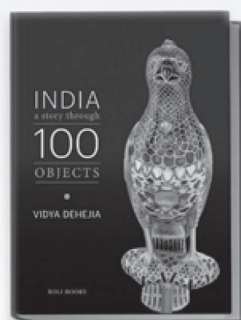
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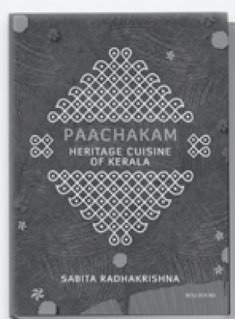
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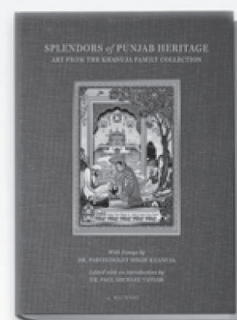
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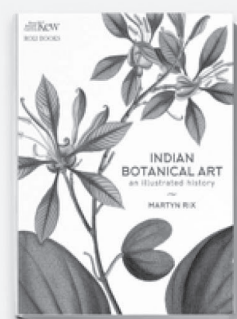
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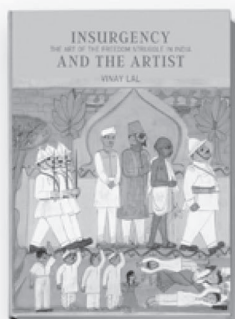
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Translation as Transformation: A Writer-Translator's Reflections

Umesh Kumar

TRANSLATING MYSELF AND OTHERS

By Jhumpa Lahiri

Princeton University Press, 2022, pp. 198, ₹ 599.00

At a lecture¹, Issac Bashevis Singer—the Yiddish Nobel Prize-winning author—was once asked: ‘What would you do if you were to meet God face to face?’ And Singer’s answer was: ‘I would ask him to collaborate with me on some translations. I would not trust him to do it himself.’ In other words, Singer is explicitly foregrounding the overarching role of translation in a writer’s literary journey; the necessity of collaborative translation, and the baggage of trust deficit that translators carry historically, among others. In her new book *Translating Myself and Others*, Jhumpa Lahiri, over a course of ten essays, aided by an Introduction and an Afterword, addresses all such old questions, including the ones raised by Singer. Not only that (without providing definitive answers), but she also asks (new) questions on—language and belonging, translation and transformation, translating self versus translating others—arising from her own predicament of juggling between Italian and English as a writer, not to mention Bengali—a language that she speaks and understands.

As a child of immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri never had an exclusive relationship with any one language. In fact, the problem of not belonging is a predominant theme in her literary works as well. The experience of straddling the twin worlds of Bengali and English—her mother tongue and the tongue of her education respectively—not only created a linguistic dilemma but a hyphenated state of being. As a linguistic orphan, Lahiri sets out to choose a language of her own. Consequently, after the publication of her novel *Lowland* in 2013, she stopped writing in English and took up Italian to ‘feel free’. In ‘Why Italian?’—the collection’s first essay, Lahiri problematizes the idea of adopting a language and possessing it, ‘But I also ask myself: 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?’ (p. 22). The author

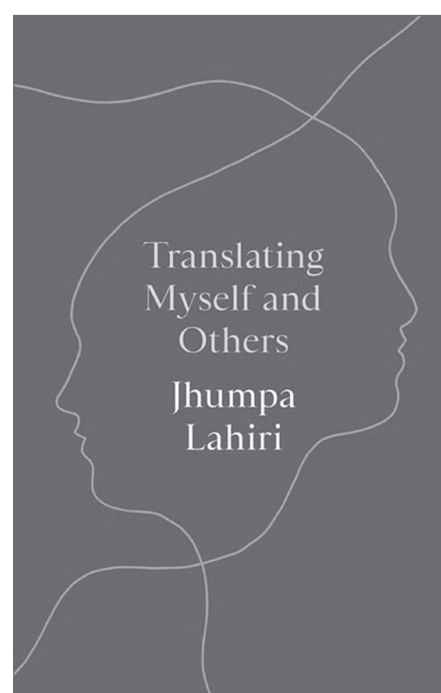
theorizes her journey of learning and becoming one with Italian by using illuminating metaphors and similes. She calls this act ‘passing through a series of doors’, ‘surrendering herself to a figurative (voluntary) form of blindness’, and at last, symbolically comparing her growth to that of a ‘graft’ being put on the branch of a tree—on to a language. Curiously though, Lahiri does not discuss the other connotations of the graft metaphor, which she does diligently with respect

to the other metaphors. It would have been interesting had she also delved into the ‘parasitic’ character of a graft.

The chapters titled ‘Containers’, ‘Juxtaposition’ and ‘Substitution’ reflect Lahiri’s growing stature as an emerging translator. Taking leads from her experience of translating Domenico Starnone’s novel trilogy *Tie; Tric; and Trust* (it is interesting how these words also resonate in the act of translation in general) the author conveys that a translation can never be definitive—for it is always an act of becoming. For example, in ‘Juxtaposition’ she notes: ‘Translation is an act of doubling and converting, and the resulting transformation is precarious, debatable even in its final form’ (p. 43).

In ‘In Praise of Echo’ and in ‘An Ode to the Mighty Optative’ Lahiri painfully discusses the cliché charge often levelled against translation where those dismissing it term it a ‘mere echo’ of the original. While rereading the myth of Echo and Narcissus from a translation perspective, she terms translation ‘foremost as a metamorphosis: a radical, painful, and miraculous transformation’ (p. 46) that evokes the translator’s ability to ‘look into a mirror and see someone rather than herself’ (p. 59). In both the essays, the author passionately argues for translation to be called transformation—having roots in imagination, ingenuity, and freedom and not just a derivation and imitation of the so-called original.

The essay ‘Where I find Myself’ is subtitled ‘On Self-Translation’. Employing a surgical metaphor, she delves into the process of translating her own Italian novel *Dove mi trovo* into English as *Whereabouts* (2021). For her, ‘The responsibility of translation is



as grave and precarious as that of a surgeon who is trained to transplant organs or to redirect the blood flow to our heart’ (p. 71). Notwithstanding the ethics of self-translation and the conflict involved therein, Lahiri fascinatingly explains how the process of self-translation not only gave a deep awareness of the book she had written but also compelled her to revise it for the subsequent Italian edition. However, her arguments and concerns on self-translation are

not entirely new for we already know Issac Bashevis Singer’s thoughts on this issue. According to him², ‘translation undresses a literary work, shows it in its true nakedness. An author may fool himself in his own language, but many of his shortcomings become clear to him in another language. Translation tells the bitter truth.’ The commendable thing is that Lahiri is not scared of this bitter truth.

In ‘Traduzione (stra)ordinaria/(Extra)ordinary Translation’, using a translator’s lens, Lahiri provides discerning and empathetic attention to Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci’s *Letters from Prison*. With a series of examples, the author argues, ‘Translation was a reality, aspiration, discipline, anchor, and metaphor throughout his life’ (p. 102). In other words, Lahiri contends, with a sustained reading of Gramsci’s prison letters that translation was not only an integral part of his political consciousness but also a vehicle of his emotional and intimate communications. Written originally for a panel, the essay, however, lacks cohesiveness, maintained otherwise in the rest of the book, mainly due to the heavy traffic of bullet points/annotated style that the author has incorporated.

In ‘Calvino Abroad’ (the Italian version is also available in the appendix), Lahiri takes up the question that seeks to answer the reasons behind Calvino’s popularity as a translated author. Lahiri subtly brings out that Calvino uses a language that is ‘limpid-complex, intellectual-ironic, sober-playful—resonates in any language’ (p. 146) which in turn creates a ‘secret essence’—a prerequisite for the miracle of translation to happen. In fact, while calling translation a miracle, Lahiri alludes to an essay written by Calvino

“As a child of immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri never had an exclusive relationship with any one language. In fact, the problem of not belonging is a predominant theme in her literary works as well.”

himself.

Throughout the book, Lahiri creates an undercurrent that compels the readers to understand translation as transformation. And it is the theme of transformation that she eventually returns to in her ‘Afterword’. Recounting the experience of translating Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the slow parallel death of her own mother, Lahiri transports the readers to a world where the boundaries between the real and the imagined begin to collide. For instance, consider this: ‘Every transformation in the poem now assumed a new shade of meaning. Though certain beings do die in Ovid, the vast majority ceases to be one thing but becomes something else’ (p. 153). The utterance is equally applicable to Lahiri’s dying mother in the essay.

Many of the concerns recounted in the paragraphs above are not unknown to the scholars of translation studies. But Lahiri, accompanied by her uncluttered language, deft touch, and novel metaphors, manages to create new terms of references both for the discipline and practice of translation. A collection of personal essays, *Translating Myself and Others* manages to reveal the transforming and revelatory powers of translation. The book is certainly a tour de force love letter to ‘the most intense form of reading and rereading there is’ (p. 83). The cover of the book might intrigue Indian readers. Lahiri, in her acknowledgments, calls it female Janus—alluding to the Roman God associated with doors, gates, and all beginnings and depicted with two opposite faces. Likewise, Janus is an apt metaphor for translation and a great choice for the cover. However, quite surprisingly, Janus is missing from the index!

References

1. Cited in Sujit Mukherjee, *Translation as Discovery* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1981), p. 32.
2. Ibid. p. 28.

Umesh Kumar, Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, is a literary translator.

Manto in Toto: Rejigging the Jigsaw

Harish Trivedi

THE COLLECTED STORIES OF SAADAT HASAN MANTO, VOLUME 1: BOMBAY AND POONA

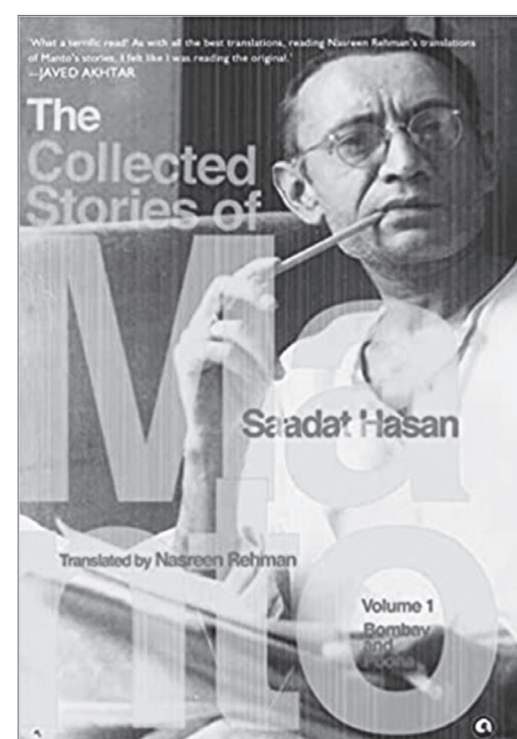
By Saadat Hasan Manto. Translated from the original Urdu by Nasreen Rehman
Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2022, pp. 548, ₹ 999.00

On the very first page of this book, the translator anticipates and answers, or at least deflects, a question many askance readers may have in mind. ‘Those irked by yet another translation of Manto’s stories,’ says Nasreen Rehman, ‘should blame David Davidar, who suggested that I undertake this venture’ (p. ix).

It turns out that Rehman had approached Davidar, the founder of the publishing company Aleph, with a modest proposal to publish a selection of fifteen stories by Manto about film life that she had translated, as a by-product of her PhD thesis titled, ‘A History of the Cinema in Lahore 1917-1947’. But if there is a publisher in India who readily deals in quantity and goes for doorstoppers, it is dear David. Further, if half a dozen publishers in India, Pakistan and Britain were already raking it in by publishing Manto in English, there was no reason why he should be left out, especially when he was ready to do it bigger if not better.

This is only the first volume of the three that Davidar and Rehman have planned which will eventually contain *all* the short stories of Manto which apparently number 255. This is a surprisingly large number; Premchand wrote just over 300 in a career that was a decade longer. But a friend of Manto’s who was constantly with him in his last year once said that in that one year alone (1954), Manto wrote about 100 stories—at the rate roughly of one story per bottle, for he was by then a confirmed alcoholic, in deep penury, and obliged to push his pen constantly for his bread and wine (Mohammad Asadullah, cited in *Saadat Hasan Manto: Dastavez* (in Hindi), 1993, II: 321).

The story of how Nasreen Rehman began reading Manto in Rawalpindi where she grew up is even more interesting. She was thirteen years old when she found out that there was a girl in her school who refused



to wear knickers, whereupon an older confidante told her that the main character in a Manto story titled ‘Mozelle’ did not wear knickers either. This is clearly as good a reason for beginning to read Manto as any other, and one that he himself would have been delighted with. And yes, that story is to be found in this volume, so hurry while stocks last.

It is a paradox that Manto’s iconic reputation rests mainly on his Partition stories. Even they have read ‘Toba Tek Singh’ who haven’t read another word by Manto, or anything else on Partition. But this seems unfair all round. There are many other writers in Hindi and Urdu (if not also in English) who have written on Partition and written as well as Manto if not a little better. To adapt a sentence from Manto’s favourite poet Ghalib, ‘*Partition ke tumhi ustaad naheen ho Manto*’ (Manto, you are not the only master of Partition).

My own short-list on the theme includes short stories by Mohan Rakesh (‘Malbe ka Malik’), Krishan Chander (‘Peshawar Express’) and several other writers from the 4-volume anthology of Partition short stories edited some decades ago by Alok Bhalla. (I was invited to translate both ‘Toba Tek Singh’ and ‘Malbe ka Malik’ for the same Hindi-Urdu anthology in 1993, and still cannot decide which of the two stories I like more.) And above these, I would place at least three novels which no mere story can match: *Jhootha Sach* by Yashpal (2 vols. 1958, 1960; tr. from Hindi as *This is Not That Dawn*, 2010); *Tamas* by Bhisam Sahni (1973, first tr. from Hindi as *Tamas*, 1988), and *Basti* by Intizar Husain (1979; tr. from Urdu as *Basti*, 1995). Manto never wrote a novel, so a comparison does not begin to