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Foreword Review ESSAYS

Translating Myself and Others

Jhumpa Lahiri
Princeton University Press (May 17, 2022)
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Translating Myself and Others is an academic collection of Jhumpa Lahiri's musings on language and translation.

Lahiri, a reader and writer in multiple languages, focuses on the translation of Italian, with insightful references to Greek and Latin; however, there are also mentions of her younger role as a translator for her Bengali parents. Much of the book focuses on her experiences translating and reading novels by Domenico Starnone, interposed by translation problems like that of translating one's own work, or what translation does to a source text. The legacies of other Italian thinkers are also addressed.

Lahiri's in-depth meditations on Starnone and Gramsci address greater truths with turns and plays on language: Lahiri remarks upon naming the novel's translation "Trick," like "trick or treat": "the novel reminds us that childhood is scary." Metaphors extend across the essays to bring cohesion to the book, as with the myth of Echo and Narcissus, which captures the true task of the translator, changing a source text into both "acoustic and visual reflection of a text."

By the end of the book, literature and the real world begin to collide, as the Covid-19 pandemic interrupts Lahiri's work and life. Beautiful metaphors relating Lahiri's pandemic experience to the works of Gramsci and Ovid illuminate the intricacies of translation that move beyond language into sensations and emotions.

Lahiri's arguments are accessible to monolingual readers and are packed with applicable linguistic information. The original sections in the source language often accompany the translations, including through two appendices of essays that were translated from Italian for the book.

Translating Myself and Others is a thought-provoking collection of essays about the art of modern translation.

GEORGE HAJJAR (May / June 2022)

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