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Eleonora Natalia Ravizza

Jhumpa Lahiri's Narratives of Self-Translation as Dynamic Encounters with the Other

Abstract I: Questo saggio descrive come alcune narrazioni che affrontano le modalità relazionali di costituzione di soggettività ibride possano incorporare processi (auto)traduttivi. *In altre parole*, l'opera autobiografica di Jhumpa Lahiri che affronta la relazione dell'autrice con l'italiano come lingua straniera e come lingua della sua più recente produzione letteraria, è qui analizzato come un testo che mette in atto i processi di apprendimento e auto-ridefinizione di un parlante non nativo. Sebbene Lahiri descriva la sua narrativa come uno spazio apparentemente intimo di esilio ed isolamento, questo saggio dimostra che essa è invece caratterizzata da una consapevolezza della natura transpersonale e relazionale della soggettività, oltre che dal desiderio di esplorare le lingue come luoghi di esilio e connessione con l'Altro. Inoltre, dimostrando che la lingua è essa stessa un luogo di alterità, Lahiri affronta la comunicazione interlinguistica e interculturale come forme di mutua comprensione e rispetto reciproco.

Abstract II: This essay deals with how translational processes may be incorporated in narratives concerned with the relational modes in which hybrid subjectivities may come into being. *In altre parole*, Jhumpa Lahiri's autobiographical work which addresses the author's relationship to Italian as a foreign language, as well as her choice of Italian as the language of her most recent literary production, is analysed as a text which does not only represent, but also stages the processes through which a second language is learnt and contributes in redefining the self-perception of the speaker. Although Lahiri describes her fiction as an apparently intimate space of isolation and exile, in this essay I argue that it is overdetermined by an awareness of the transpersonal, relational nature of subjectivity, as well as by the desire to explore languages as sites of both exile and reconnection. Also, by showing that language is, itself, a place of alterity, she challenges notions of selfhood and otherness, and engages with interlinguistic and intercultural communication as forms of mutual understanding and respect.

Unlike my parents, I translate not so much to survive in the world around me
as to create and illuminate a nonexistent one. Fiction is the foreign land of my choosing,
the place where I strive to convey and preserve the meaningful.
And whether I write as an American or an Indian,
about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains constant:
I translate, therefore I am (Lahiri 2002: 120).

The rephrasing of the Cartesian *cogito* which the Indian-American Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri proposed in the brief passage quoted above is the starting point of my reflection on how translational processes may be incorporated in narratives concerned with the relational modes in which hybrid subjectivities may come into being. Lahiri's "I translate, therefore I am" (Lahiri 2002: 120) suggests that translation is what makes a thinking, dynamic subject immediately aware and certain of his or her existence within a cross-cultural, multi-lingual world. Self-awareness, in other words, is presented not as the outcome of a solipsistic reflection, but rather as a result of linguistic exchanges involving a continuous relationship with the Other, or better with multiple Others. Moreover, self-awareness emerges as strictly connected with the understanding of differences, the necessity of moving across languages and cultures, and the capacity of giving a linguistic shape to the space of cultural inbetweenness which overdetermines composite cultural contexts. Lahiri's proposition is rooted in her autobiographical experience as the American-raised daughter of first-generation, Bengali-speaking immigrants, but it goes beyond that. As Lahiri herself points out, it also defines her writing, which in the passage above she describes as a space where to "convey and preserve the meaningful" (Lahiri 2002: 120). Although she describes her fiction as an apparently intimate space of isolation and exile ("the foreign land of my choosing", as she calls it in the passage above), in this essay I argue that it is characterized by insights into the transpersonal, relational nature of subjectivity, as well as by the desire to explore languages as sites of both exile and reconnection.

Elena Di Giovanni, the Italian translator of the essay from which the above-quoted passage is taken, observes that Lahiri's "I translate, therefore I am" is to be understood in the light of a tendency to consider translation not only as a finite linguistic act, but rather as a broader, unfinished cultural process which is part of the daily experience of migrant subjects, but also, in a larger sense, of societies which are becoming ever more multicultural and multilingual. Di Giovanni describes Lahiri's engagement with translation as a "humanization of translational processes" (2009: 474; my translation). Her narratives are, in fact, able to show how a continuous practice of linguistic negotiations characterizes the everyday experience of those living in the interstitial spaces between cultures, as well as to represent the struggles and anxieties which inevitably accompany it. As Lahiri notes, in her short stories collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) which gained her the Pulitzer Prize – but also, I would argue, in her other English-language works, *The Namesake* (2003), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and *The Lowland* (2013) – all her characters are translators, who, as she claims, "must make sense of the foreign in order to survive" (2002: 119). In addition, language is the fundamental issue at stake in the continuous negotiations which they carry out, and as such, as Lahiri puts it, it is itself "an element of drama" (2002: 120): it is lost and

mourned, found and re-created; it is part of the characters' efforts of self-preservation, or it allows them to configure new possibilities for existence. As they translate themselves from Bengali to English, or from English to Bengali, they also re-position themselves into their world, and they redefine their intersubjective limits.

Although the whole of Jhumpa Lahiri's production deals with what Di Giovanni calls the "humanization of translational processes" in this essay I focus specifically on *In altre parole* (2015), the book that marked a turning point in the literary career of a writer who, after establishing herself as one of the most successful English-speaking writers of her generation, elected Italian as her new literary language. Lahiri's first autobiographical work addresses the same issues that she explored in her short stories and novels: the search for identity, cultural alienation and the complex negotiations of belonging. Although the similarity of themes shows the deep interconnection between the Indian-American writer's fictional and non-fictional writings, in this essay I argue that *In altre parole* occupies a special place in her literary production on account of its highly self-reflexive nature. *In altre parole* describes Lahiri's personal development and growing awareness of her translinguistic and transcultural subjectivity not just by selecting and presenting actions and events from a more or less distant past that have significantly affected her present, but also by focusing on the linguistic media in which her life-experience is embedded. In *In altre parole*, language 'is' the message. By translating her English-Bengali experience into a language which is apparently distant and unrelated to her, she performs a series of acts of self-translation which allow the reader to get some insights into the ways migrant identities are shaped within the linguistic codes in which their experience unfolds. By showing that language itself is a place of alterity, she challenges notions of selfhood and otherness, and engages with interlinguistic and intercultural communication as forms of mutual understanding and respect.

In the following sections, I first discuss *In altre parole* as a narrative of "self-translation", *i.e.* as a text in which the author redefines her own translinguistic self by moving towards spaces of Otherness. I focus on the philosophical approaches to the language which emerge from the book and discuss how Lahiri's literary exploration and construction of the self is in fact an acknowledgement of the relationality that is inscribed in culture, literature, and the linguistic medium. Secondly, by contextualising Lahiri's work within postcolonial discourses on the exilic conditions of migrant subjects, I focus on the politics of language and self-translation emerging from the text, addressing the question of how *In altre parole* may be read in terms of engagement towards a better understanding and acceptance of difference.

***In altre parole*: A Narrative of Transcultural Self-translation**

As Falceri, Gentes and Manterola remind us, the practice of self-translation, which involves bilingual authors writing a text into a source language and translating it themselves into a target language, has gained increasing interest among researchers ever since the beginning of the 21st century (2017: vii). Spagnuolo also shows that it is the self-reflexive dimension of self-translation – *i.e.* the fact that it challenges traditional notions of translation theory, such as originality or the dichotomy of author and translator – which makes it a most compelling field of investigation (2017: 68). Moreover, she adds, self-translations allow us to get insights

into how bilingual selves are negotiated within the boundaries of the language they speak, or rather, as I will argue in the following paragraphs, by which they are spoken. Differently put, an analysis of self-translated texts allows us to understand how subjects do not just simply express themselves in different ways according to the languages they speak, but also how they mediate their own identity according to the language in which their writings and their speech acts are produced.

In this perspective, literature emerges as a privileged site for the study of self-translation because it provides access to a knowledge of language as a living, shared experience, and as a practice embedded in social relationships, political struggles, historical conjunctures, and cultural contexts. Language is the site in which human experiences take form, along the dialectics of the private and the public, the collective and the individual. The Marxist philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle provides a linguistic interpretation of Althusser's theory of interpellation, arguing that language addresses the pre-ideological individuals and produces them as subjects. "Language is the site of subjectivation through interpellation", claims Lecercle by drawing on Althusserian terminology (2006: 128), thus implying that in order to become able to interact with the society they live in, subjects negotiate their positions within an external, material and shared linguistic medium. In his essays on Marxism and philosophy of Language (Cf. Lecercle 2003, 2004, 2006a, 2006b), he shows that literary texts stage the mutual articulations and redefinitions of personal and collective dialectics, and allow us to perceive the ways in which individuals are captured by the always-already collective experience of language, and included or excluded by the regimes and structures of subjectification that inform their epoch.

Lecercle's theories on language and subjectivation are central to my analysis of the self-translational processes at work in Jhumpa Lahiri's *In altre parole* for two main reasons. Firstly, since Lecercle insists on the fact that language is a material and historicised phenomenon, he also endorses the philosophical premise of the expulsion of the centrality of the individual subject in favour of a collective, transformative conception of subjectivity whose agency is externalised. Differently put, as languages are sites of alterities – no single subject can fully claim to "own" or "master" them because languages are the product of extended social interactions – subjectivity always comes into being through a relation with Otherness. Secondly, Lecercle's claim that languages are indissolubly linked to cultures and cultural values does not imply that languages are impermeable to (ex)changes and individual contributions. In contrast with fetishised conceptions of language and linguistic standards that are often connected to the global diffusion of English as a lingua franca, languages are described by Lecercle as unstable systems in a continuous state of variation, prone to being transformed through the single performances of speakers, vernacular appropriations, or external influences. Self-translations may be considered as acts of displacement, in which spaces of cultural, linguistic and subjective hybridisation may come into being, thus challenging monolingual paradigms and promoting transcultural interaction. Self-translations, as a matter of fact, may enact strategies of counter-interpellation, in which individuals provisionally appropriate and modify the language-system through acts of creation which are rooted in the compositeness of their linguistic awareness.

While Jhumpa Lahiri's *In altre parole* cannot be addressed as an example of self-translation in a conventional sense (the author did not first write it in English and then translate it into Italian or vice versa), I argue that it would not be accurate to call it a narrative *about* self-translation either. It is, in its full right, a narrative *of* self-translation, in which the author *performs* the deep personal transformations generated by her progressive familiarisation with a new language. She does not only tell the story of how she started to speak Italian, but she also enacts processes that the reader may detect first-hand in the ways her style accommodates to Italian, becoming simpler and at time more dissonant. "In italiano scrivo senza stile, in modo primitivo. Sono sempre in dubbio. Ho soltanto l'intenzione, insieme ad una fede cieca ma sincera, di essere capita e di capire me stessa", declares Lahiri (2016: 58). Although Lahiri's style is characterized by parataxis and simple lexical choices also in English, in her Italian writings her use of short sentences may strike the reader as rather unusual, as if she felt the need to stop and make constant breaks. Lexical choices are often the object of her writing. Whenever she uses a less common Italian word, she comments on how she encountered it, memorised it, or made it part of her experience. Also, she discusses the processes of editing and revision that the book itself has undergone, acknowledging the help of friends, teachers and editors, allowing the reader to have a diachronic impression of the evolution of the work. Besides, she dwells on the difficulties and frustrations which mark her experience as a learner of a foreign language. She shows, for example, how her teachers and friends usually correct her when she uses forms that are not perceived as idiomatic by native speakers, or when she uses the *imperfetto* in a way that is not grammatically appropriate. She often analyses the new words she learns, and elaborates on their imperfect renditions, or in some cases even untranslatability, into the English language.

The process of self-translation undertaken in *In altre parole* is characterized by the need of constantly creating new cognitive tools through which Lahiri tries to make sense of the reality around her in a language that she perceives as foreign. The book's rich imagery and metaphors contribute significantly to the unfolding of the autobiographical narrative. For example, chapters often carry out extended metaphors through which she describes aspects of her language learning process: "L'adolescente peloso" ("The Hairy Teenager"), in which Lahiri compares English and Italian to two children, the former being like a jealous teenager son, and the latter a baby needful of a mother's care; "Il triangolo" ("The Triangle"), in which she uses an extended spatial metaphor to describe her relationship to the three languages in which her life unfolds, "Il muro" ("The Wall"), in which she talks about her foreignness. Lahiri deploys a concrete language, which is easily accessible to apprentices of foreign languages, to simultaneously interpret the world around her and linguistically re-mediate and redefine her position within the foreign language in which she tries to write.

The same functions could be ascribed to the two short stories originally composed in Italian contained in the book (see chapters "Lo scambio" and "Penombra"), through which Lahiri resorts to the literary genre which gave her fame and constructs a story within the story. What is more, Lahiri contextualises and comments the two short narratives, elaborating on the conditions in which they were first conceived, and on how their meaning progressively became clear to her in the course of her language-learning process. The au-

thor abandons her authorial position, to become a reader herself and engage in the game of interpretation of her own texts. She reads the stories as allegorical representations of her relationship to writing and to language, thus showing that they could be approached as *mise-en-abyme* of her biographical experience.

The above-mentioned recurrence of spatial metaphor can also be interpreted in terms of self-positioning *sensu* Stuart Hall. Differently put, the metaphors are aimed at making the position of enunciation clear, so that the author is enabled to clarify “the critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’” (Hall 1994: 225; italics in the original text). By elaborating on spatial metaphors, Lahiri does not only clarify the singularity of her own experience, but also reconfigures it in terms that may provide her with new expressive means to make her transculturality intelligible and communicable. This is particularly evident in the above-mentioned chapter titled “Il triangolo”, in which the geometrical metaphor of a triangle allows her to comment on how learning to speak and to write in a third language allows her to repeat the familiar experience of linguistic alienation which is connected to her immigrant background: “Dove mi porta, questo nuovo tragitto [towards Italian, editor’s note]? Dove finisce la fuga e quando? Dopo essere fuggita, cosa farò? In realtà non è una fuga nel senso stretto della parola. Pur fuggendo mi accorgo che sia l’inglese sia il bengalese mi affiancano. Così come in un triangolo, un punto conduce inevitabilmente all’altro” (Lahiri 2016: 152). In this chapter she recounts that, as a child, she was forbidden to speak English at home, and that her first encounter with English happened at school, where, nevertheless, it was impossible to speak Bengali. In order to be accepted in the places in which her life unfolded, she had to temporarily suppress a part of herself, and even felt ashamed of her impossibility to completely fit in. Italian allows her to take a distance from both languages, and also to develop a new self-awareness from a different point of view. The triangle thus represents the possibility of connecting the three linguistic dimensions of her life in a way that allows free movement, border-crossing, and the traversing of other spaces. It stands for an identity which refuses to be static and monoglossic, but that is always ready to be redefined by new encounters with the Other. Her translational experiences allow alterity (which, as my previous reference to Lecerle’s philosophy of language shows, is already inscribed within the nature of languages, and in Lahiri’s case is directly linked to her foreignness) to emerge as a new point of view from which language may be discovered afresh, and be endowed with new, relational meanings.

The reference to the triangle as a space of connection and transformation is accompanied by passages in which Lahiri’s self-positioning is attained by the recognition of the distance between the languages and cultural spheres in which she lives. I therefore read the following passage as a refusal to let differences be “watered down” or unproblematically recomposed:

Eppure questo mio progetto in italiano mi rende consapevole delle distanze immani tra le lingue. Una lingua straniera può significare una separazione totale. Può rappresentare, ancora oggi, la ferocia della nostra ignoranza. Per scrivere in un’altra lingua, per penetrarne il cuore, nessuna tecnologia aiuta. Non si può accelerare il processo,

non si può abbreviarlo. L'andamento è lento, zoppicante. Più capisco la lingua, più si ingarbuglia. Più mi avvicino, più si allontana. Ancora oggi il distacco fra me e l'italiano rimane insuperabile. Ho impiegato quasi metà della mia vita per fare due passi. Per arrivare solo qui (Lahiri 2016: 90).

By claiming her foreignness, and commenting on how slow, hobbling and complex learning a language is, Lahiri fully acknowledges that the process of self-translation is never fully complete, and that it is always tentative and provisional. A few lines below, in the same chapter, she adds: “[s]e fosse possibile colmare la distanza fra me e l'italiano, smetterei di scrivere in questa lingua” (Lahiri 2016: 94). This statement implies that her creativity emerges out of an attempt, or rather a struggle to get closer to the Other, without subsuming it under the categories of the self. Differently put, Lahiri's yearning for Italian is strictly connected with its elusiveness, *i.e.* by the impossibility of feeling completely at home which generates a never-ending search for new complexities.

In spite of her awareness that overcoming the distance between herself and Italian is an impossible task, Lahiri shows that it is possible to approach a foreign language, albeit in a slow, deficient manner, by means of mediation. As she discusses her experience of finding her imperfect voice in Italian, she also focuses on the contribution made by Others to her progress, thus positioning herself within a composite network of utterances. A language, she shows, is not an abstract system, but it is connected with the way it is experienced by multiple speakers. By this token, she tells of how not-so-friendly interactions with strangers and examples of cultural shocks force her to question her self-image and her modes of relating with the new cultural context. Also, she alternates descriptions of her more impersonal interactions with tools such as dictionaries and manuals with accounts of the conversations, suggestions, corrections with which her editors, publishers, friends and teacher could provide, also (as mentioned above) in the process of composing and publishing *In altre parole*. Finally, she deals with the mediation of other works and artists in her experience as a writer, acknowledging her debt to Ovid, Matisse, Pavese, Nabokov, Ginzburg, Fuentes, and many others. Her list includes Italian and non-Italian artists. In the process of self-translation, mediation cannot be restricted to a monolingual dimension. The author becomes aware of her role by comparing herself with writers and artists who have undergone similar processes and experiences.

As a conclusive remark of this section which has focused on Lahiri's *In altre parole* as a narrative of self-translation, I would like to add that I read Lahiri's reluctance to translate her own texts from Italian into English as symptomatic of the irreversibility of the processes of self-definition which she performs in the book. What she rejects is not self-translation but rather back-translation, *i.e.* the process of reconverting a translated text into the source language. As a consequence, the creative procedure of writing into a foreign language is connected with the undertaking of a path of becoming, which does not allow Lahiri to rethink the Italian text in English or even Bengali. Translation is not a mechanical procedure, but a deeply human endeavour. This is what she implies in the following passage taken from the chapter titled “L'adolescente peloso”:

Credo che tradurre sia il modo più profondo, più intimo di leggere qualcosa. Una traduzione è un bellissimo incontro dinamico fra due lingue, due testi, due scrittori. Implica uno sdoppiamento, un rinnovamento. Nel passato amavo tradurre dal latino, dal greco, dal bengalese. È stato un modo di avvicinarmi alle diverse lingue, di sentirmi legata ad autori lontanissimi da me, nello spazio e nel tempo. Tradurre me stessa, da una lingua in cui sono ancora un'apprendista, non è la stessa cosa. Dopo aver faticato per realizzare il testo in italiano mi sento appena sbarcata, stanca ma entusiasta. Voglio fermarmi, orientarmi. Il rientro, prematuro, mi fa male. Sembra una disfatta, un regresso. Sembra distruttivo anziché creativo, quasi un suicidio (Lahiri 2016: 120).

Had Lahiri translated her own book, perhaps, the translation would have certainly rivalled with the original text, and it would have probably nullified her efforts in writing in Italian. The task of translating *In altre parole* into English was entrusted to Ann Goldstein, editor at the New Yorker and translator, among others, of Elena Ferrante, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Giacomo Leopardi and Alessandro Baricco. Lahiri deals with the reasons why she did not translate the book herself in the "Author's note" to the English edition, in which she claims that, in order to be more honest, her translation had to pass through the filter of someone else's linguistic sensibility (Lahiri 2016, xiii-xiv). Alterity, paradoxically, is the only condition through which the text may "come home" in English, the language which, over time, replaced the Bengali she had learnt from her parents as a child, and became her (second) native language.

The politics of Self-translation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *In altre parole*

"Com'è possibile sentirmi esiliata da una lingua che non è la mia? Che non conosco?", asks Lahiri while musing on the paradox of her choice to write her autobiographical piece in a language that is not her own (2016: 20). The question brings into play one of the most interesting tropes in post-colonial theory, *i.e.* the idea that language may be a site of exile for subjects who experience the diglossic conditions brought about by a history of colonial imposition, uprooting, and migration. Exile, which in *In altre parole* figures as the rift between her Bengali and her English identity, is a territory of non-belonging stretching between the impossibility of identifying either with an old or a new homeland. Yet, in *In altre parole*, exile emerges also as a cure to personal alienation, and becomes a way to embrace Otherness. Her choice of Italian as an arbitrary site of self-exile allows her to move beyond the conflicts of her bilingualism, and to open up to new forms of alterity.

"Reading Jhumpa Lahiri reinforces one's belief in a universal humanism where the difference among peoples is not so vast as to be unbridgeable and the distinctiveness of diverse perspectives not so irreconcilable as to create unpleasant hostilities", claims Rajini Skrikanth, thus voicing one of the most widespread criticisms against her narratives (2012: 51). Her short stories and fiction, in other words, have been accused of shying away from spelling out the politics of class and race, and of representing difference in a toned-down, even desirable way. Although she engages with the hybridity of migrant subjectivities, her work seems to lack the militancy which is usually associated with post-colonial art. Her rather heterogeneous representations of Asian-American immigrants seem more inscribable

in the paradigm of 'diversity' – "a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics, or ethnology" as Bhabha puts it (1994: 52) – rather than "difference" as "a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity" (Bhabha 1994: 52). Susan Muchshima Moynihan, though she partly agrees with the criticisms phrased above, adds nonetheless that "[u]sing the lens of affect, however, allows us to see how even the most intimate relationship between characters to unacknowledged histories of contact in their irony and contradiction" (2012: 112).

In this essay, I have analysed a work in which the intimate alienation Lahiri claims both to retreat in and give voice to in her writing (2002: 120) is addressed from a very private, personal point of view. In *In altre parole* an autobiographical persona is engaged in writing and translating itself into a foreign language. "Perché scrivo?", Lahiri asks herself. "Per indagare il mistero dell'esistenza. Per tollerare me stessa. Per avvicinare tutto ciò che si trova al di fuori di me" (Lahiri 2016: 86). The private dimension in which her narratives unfold might indeed at first sight seem a way to escape the political, or to analyse humanity in the light of common, personal experiences which are shared through cultures: births, deaths, weddings, and so on. Nevertheless, the more intimate Lahiri's voice becomes in her personal effort of self-translation, the more evident it becomes that the private is, in fact, the collective and the inter-subjective, and both are inextricably linked with the political and the conflictual. Translating the self becomes a way of building bonds of community, in which alterity, aporias and struggles are inevitably bound to surface. The author, in the light of this, advocates for a message of care for the other, respect and solidarity: "Cosa significa una parola? E una vita? Mi pare, alla fine, la stessa cosa. Come una parola può avere tante dimensioni, tante sfumature, una tale complessità, così una persona, una vita. La lingua è lo specchio, la metafora principale. Perché in fondo il significato di una parola, così come quello di una persona, è qualcosa di smisurato, di ineffabile" (2016: 86).

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