

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Between expectations and choice

Review of ‘Translating Myself and Others’ (Princeton University Press, 2022) by Jhumpa Lahiri

TAHMINA HOSSAIN

Translation is a bridge to connect different cultures and their literatures. It's a medium to reflect the gems of a country's literature around the globe. We have known Jhumpa Lahiri as a writer, but she has also done translations in her literary career. She shares her lesser-known avatar as a translator in *Translating Myself and Others*. It is a collection of essays that is as much about the art of translation as it is about Lahiri's journey as a translator. She introduces this book by clarifying why she adopts and starts writing in Italian at the age of 40, already having achieved success in the realm of English Literature. Unfortunately, and eventually, Lahiri realises that pursuing a language for the sake of love is not a widely accepted phenomenon. Nonetheless, in her essays, she addresses her passion for language, along with the challenges of being a translator and the rejections she faces as a writer in Italian.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Ultimately, I expected this book to be more autobiographical. But, while this book contains snapshots of Lahiri's life, the essays are more theoretical than anecdotal. She focuses on the technicalities of translation. Thus, the language is formal and includes linguistic terminology, which forces you to slow down. For instance, in Chapter 5, Lahiri compares the translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*—originally written in Ancient Greek—by Ingram Bywater and by S. H. Butcher.

Lahiri chooses a less trodden path as a writer and translator. She began her writing career in the English language. At 40, she learned Italian and translated Italian literary pieces into English.

Eventually, as she became comfortable with Italian, Lahiri started writing original pieces in that language. In due course, she self-translated her Italian works into English. Lahiri mentions that her comfort in working with different languages stems from growing up in a bilingual household, where she learned both English and Bangla as a child. Thus, she always identifies herself first as a translator and then as a writer. During her undergraduate studies, she translated Bengali literary works into English. Additionally, Lahiri mentions other writers—Italo Calvino, Domenico Starnone, and Antonio Gramsci—whose works have influenced Lahiri into writing in Italian.

Innocuously, Lahiri shares her first memory of facing a translator's dilemma while making a Mother's Day card for a school project. She expresses

her confusion about addressing her mother in the card: "Dear Mom, happy Mother's Day." This part of the project stymied me, given that my mother was not 'Mom' but 'Ma'." The dilemma arises because she does not want to appear as an outcast at her school by being the only one to call her mother "Ma". At the same time, she does not want to offend her mother by writing "Mom", as Lahiri has always called her "Ma". From this anecdote, Lahiri highlights the plight that translators face regarding choices. The act of choosing becomes a burden as translators try to strike a balance between the cultural context of the readers of the translated text and the accuracy of the original text.

On the other hand, in addressing various complaints from readers against a translator, Lahiri points out the heightened expectation placed on a

translator to maintain the essence of the original text. As a translator herself, Lahiri explains the challenges and crossroads she faces, and the choices she makes as a translator in choosing any word, keeping well in mind the shortcomings and the unfortunate loss that a novel undergoes under translation: "Translation is about choosing, at times wisely, at times reluctantly, always with lingering misgivings". I resonate the most with this statement. During my undergraduate studies, I took a translation course, where we were assigned to translate a text in each class. During the class discussion, we would suggest different ways of translating the same sentences, especially when an exact equivalent translation for a word is not available in another language. In her essay, Lahiri discusses this shortcoming. She

mentions that in such cases, translators need to opt for a creative expression to convey the closest equivalence, to capture the essence of the original word or expression chosen by the author.

Furthermore, Lahiri provides insight into being a self-translator. She mentions that the rules and high expectations that exist while translating other writers become non-existent while translating oneself. As the writer of the original text, Lahiri has the power to set the standard while self-translating. Fortunately, this rule is universally recognised and respected by readers. As a result, readers graciously accept the self-translated adaptation.

Ultimately, I expected this book to be more autobiographical. But, while this book contains snapshots of Lahiri's life, the essays are more theoretical than anecdotal. She focuses on the technicalities of translation. Thus, the language is formal and includes linguistic terminology, which forces you to slow down. For instance, in Chapter 5, Lahiri compares the translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*—originally written in Ancient Greek—by Ingram Bywater and by S. H. Butcher. She provides observations and analysis of the different auxiliary words chosen by each translator. Besides, in addition to English, Bangla, and Italian, Lahiri also learned Ancient Greek and Latin. Thus, she dives deeply into the genealogy of many Italian words, as they have their origins in Latin. This shows why Lahiri is naturally inclined towards Italian and found the language easy to grasp. In a nutshell, this book will be helpful for novice translators or language enthusiasts, who will find inspiration and guidance in her essays.

Tahmina Hossain is first and foremost a reader, a lover of literature, and then a writer. If you enjoy rambling about literature like her, then reach out at literary.ramblings.by.t@gmail.com.

INTERVIEW

A STORY OF SEPARATION AND RETURN: Clare Adam on crafting ‘Love Forms’

MOHD. FARHAN

Accompanying the Booker Prize long-listed novels of this year, Clare Adam's *Love Forms* (Faber, 2025) offers an enthralling tale of Dawn, the protagonist of the novel, who is in a lifelong search for her long-lost illegitimate daughter. Although Dawn continues her strides in life from getting education, marriage, kids and divorce, her unyielding quest searching for her daughter remains undying. With Dawn's travels, the story also keeps moving to different counties from Trinidad and Tobago to Venezuela and later to England.

Clare Adam has rare prowess of delineating these different geographies, where the novel is set, in a compelling manner. On behalf of *The Daily Star*, I spoke to the author about the varied stands of the novel and her journey of becoming a novelist.

What was the igniting spark that inspired you to write *Love Forms*?

It's not easy to pinpoint exactly what it was—it all starts as a bit of a primordial soup, to be honest. But somewhere along the line I began to have an image or an idea about a mother and daughter who'd been separated, and were trying to find their way back to each other. I didn't know who they were or what their circumstances were, or why they'd been separated; I had to discover all that through the process of writing.

It was only through multiple drafts, working through the story from all possible angles, that I figured out who Dawn was—a woman from a middle-class Trinidadian family who became pregnant at 16. The circumstances of the separation emerged gradually: being sent away to Venezuela to have the baby in secret, the adoption, Dawn's move to England. These weren't things I knew at the beginning. The writing process itself revealed the story to me. It wasn't until I wrote the last line of the last

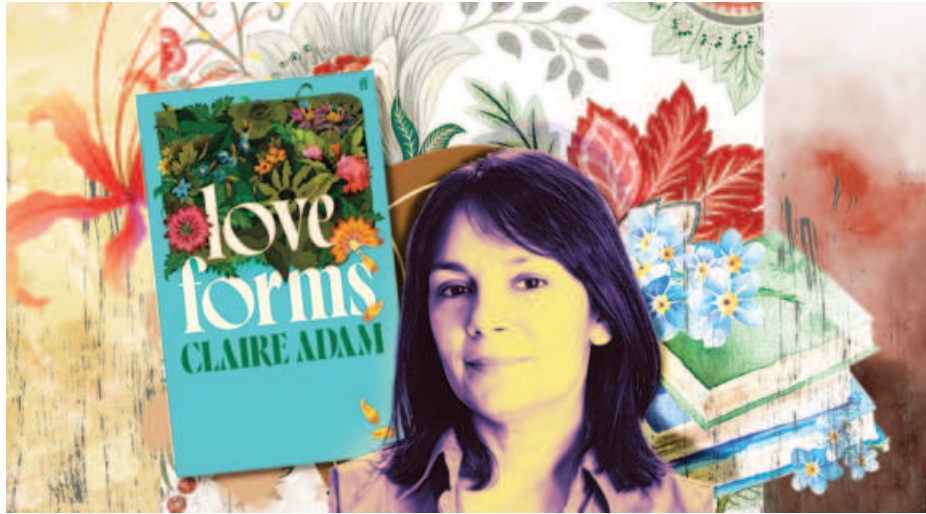


ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

draft that I fully understood what the book was about.

Does the protagonist, Dawn, carry any resemblance to your own life?

Dawn's story is not my story, but there are elements I drew from my own experience. Like Dawn, I left Trinidad and settled in England, and when you move like that, there's loss. The Trinidad of my childhood is different from Trinidad today—things have changed. Going back can be difficult when the place has changed so much.

But Dawn's specific trauma—becoming pregnant at 16, being sent away, losing her child—that's not drawn from personal experience.

Do you think deserting the illegitimate child was the only choice that Dawn's parents had because of social unacceptance? Or was it their love for Dawn that they wanted a good unstained prosperous future for her?

I think it was both, really—and that's what makes it complicated and painful. I think

Dawn's parents genuinely loved her and wanted to protect her future. In their minds, if word got out that she'd had a baby at 16, she would be sort of "ruined"—no respectable man would marry her and her prospects would be destroyed. They were acting out of love, trying to save her from shame and social rejection. But at the same time, they were also protecting themselves, their own reputation, their standing in the community. What's tragic is that in trying to protect Dawn, they inadvertently may have caused a different kind of harm: the lifelong trauma of separation, felt by both mother and child.

The narrator in the novel most often keeps unrolling her memories and her past. As a novelist, how do you look at the idea of "memories and the past" for fiction writing? Memory is fascinating for fiction because it's not a simple record of what happened; it's part of the character's story of themselves and it's susceptible to change over time. In Dawn's case, there are gaps. Trauma is part of the

reason for that, perhaps, but I didn't think of it in that way when I was writing, and I don't think that's how she would think about it. Dawn is always conscious of the fact that her daughter may be out there in the world somewhere, and that she (her daughter) may not have had a good life. Dawn is a very reluctant narrator for that reason. She doesn't want to make herself the centre of the story, or to talk about her own pain, or use words like 'trauma'. And yet she has to try to put her fragments of memory together—because she's trying to find her daughter, firstly because she's sort of preparing to give an account of herself to the daughter she may one day meet, and also, just for herself, as a way of understanding her life.

Do you miss your homeland Trinidad and Tobago where *Love Forms* begins? Does it reflect your own longing to return to your homeland?

I left Trinidad at 18 and I've been living in the UK for over 20 years now. For most of my life,

I particularly love William Trevor, John McGahern, and Claire Keegan. Americans: there are many, but I like to mention Arthur Miller and Marilynne Robinson. The next category I'm going to call the Nobels, since that's what they have in common.

I went back to Trinidad regularly—every year, at least. But a few years ago my parents left Trinidad and moved to London, and mentally, for me, it feels like a big shift.

It's a strange position to be in—having a "home" which is far away and kind of belongs to the past, one that becomes less and less accessible as each year passes—and yet not

feeling that the place where you currently live is fully "home" either. But this is a common experience now. There are so many of us who live far from where we grew up. And it helps that I'm not alone in this—many people understand this feeling.

Your depiction of the places is so exquisitely compelling that the reader may witness everything happening so realistically before one's eyes. I would like to know from you the importance of this craft of novel writing.

Thank you. On craft, I offer you this, from Flannery O'Connor: the meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning. Give your reader an experience, in other words.

Who are some of the authors or what are some books that have influenced your writing?

Everyone I read is an influence, but I do find myself drawn to Indian or Indian diaspora authors: V. S. Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry, Akhil Sharma; and I love Vivek Shanbhag, who's also published by Faber in the UK. As for Irish authors, I particularly love William Trevor, John McGahern, and Claire Keegan. Americans: there are many, but I like to mention Arthur Miller and Marilynne Robinson. The next category I'm going to call the Nobels, since that's what they have in common, but I assure you that I was reading them before they won their prizes: Kazuo Ishiguro, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Doris Lessing, and JM Coetzee. Naipaul belongs in the Nobel category too, of course: I always find myself mentioning his name multiple times when I talk about my writing.

Mohd. Farhan teaches English at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He often writes on books, and interviews authors for various reputed English dailies including The Hindu, Hindustan Times, and Hindu Business Line, among others.